

# MEGILLAT RUTH

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

## Shiur #11: Naomi's Arrival in Bethlehem

And it was when they came to Bethlehem that the entire city tumultuously greeted them. And they said, "Is this Naomi?" And she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi [pleasant], call me Mara [bitter], for *Sha-ddai* has embittered me terribly. I left full and God has returned me empty; why should you call me Naomi? For God has testified against me, and *Sha-ddai* has done evil to me."  
([Ruth 1:19-21](#))

Who is Naomi? Is she a kindred spirit of Elimelekh, Machlon, and Khilyon, selfishly abandoning her people during their time of need?<sup>1</sup> Or is she perhaps a lone dissenting voice in her family, whose only option is to follow her husband to Moav against her better judgment? Is she an empathetic mother-in-law who cares for nothing aside from the well-being of her daughters-in-law, or a self-serving woman, whose main interest is in being unencumbered upon her return to her hometown? Is Naomi an emblem of piety, recognizing the justness of her embittered state, or bitterly angry at God, unable to reconcile herself to her misery?

I have dealt with several of these questions in previous *shiurim*. In this *shiur*, I will explore Naomi's general persona from several different angles. After examining at greater length the rabbinic perspective on the question of Naomi's character, we will return once again to the text, scrutinizing the textual representation of both the townspeople of Bethlehem and of Naomi herself.

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<sup>1</sup> [1] I have consciously adopted here the negative rabbinic depiction of Elimelekh, Machlon, and Khilyon.

## Rabbinic Literature

Rabbinic literature tends to regard Naomi as a righteous character, following the general tone of the biblical narrative. However, in previous *shiurim*, we have noted that Rabbinic literature contains a fair measure of uncertainty, both with regard to Naomi's culpability in leaving Israel during the famine and with respect to her motivations vis-à-vis her daughters-in-law. Some *midrashim* even cast doubt on Naomi's general piety:

“And God has returned me empty. [Namely,] without Torah and without good deeds. (*Zohar Bereishit, Lekh Lekha* 81a)

Another *midrash* records directly contradicting notions of Naomi's righteousness:

“And they walked on the road to return to the land of Yehuda. 2[2] R. Yochanan said: They transgressed the way of the Torah and walked on the holiday.

Another explanation, “And they walked on the road. The road narrowed for them and they walked [each one] alone.

Another explanation, “And they walked on the road. It teaches that they walked barefoot [with their bodies touching the ground].3[3]

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2 [2] These explanations are motivated by the extra word *ba-derekh*, on the road. Is it not obvious that they walked on the road? A similar question in a different context is raised in *Midrash Tehillim 3:3*.

3 [3] There are several different versions of this *midrash*. I have used the critical text which appears in the Bar Ilan Responsa Project (prepared by M. B. Lerner in his doctoral dissertation, Jerusalem, 1971). I have deviated from that version only in the second half of the third explanation, “They walked barefoot with their bodies touching the ground. This is the version found in the *Yalkut Shimoni* version of this *midrash*. Lerner's edition actually reads: “They walked barefoot and their body was *mitpa'êr*. The meaning of the reflexive verb *mitpa'êr* in this context is obscure. While it can mean that their body was beautified by their barefoot journey (which seems unlikely), it can also mean that they were flaunting their beauty as they walked barefoot. Neither of these explanations adds significant meaning to the narrative, which is why I chose to

Another explanation, “And they walked on the road.” They were occupied with the laws of converts. ([Ruth Rabba 2](#))

This *midrash* may be prompted by the general usage of the expression, *la-lekhet ba-derekh*, to walk on the way or road. While here it means literally to walk, it is more frequently employed to mean to follow the proper moral or religious path.<sup>4</sup>[4] This *midrash* proposes four different homiletical explanations for the phrase, “*va-teilakhna va-derekh*,” describing Naomi’s initial return to Bethlehem with her daughters-in-law. The second explanation highlights the distance between Naomi and her daughters-in-law (as examined previously), while the third explanation is focused on Naomi’s destitution.<sup>5</sup>[5] The remaining two explanations in the *midrash* record seemingly contradictory notions with respect to Naomi’s piety. In the first explanation, Naomi is depicted as a blatant transgressor, who chooses to travel on a holiday despite the attending prohibition.<sup>6</sup>[6] The final explication of the phrase presents the opposite approach,

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incorporate the version of the *Yalkut Shimoni* in this part of the *midrash*. To indicate this deviation, I have placed the borrowed phrase in brackets. The Vilna edition of *Ruth Rabba* has three explanations, as it combines the middle two explanations: “The road narrowed for them for they walked barefoot.” It is possible that this version understands the phrase *hutzra aleihem* not in the sense of narrowing, but rather as the road becoming painful for them because they walked barefoot. In general, the multiple variations of this *midrash* make it difficult to reconstruct an accurate version.

4 [4] See, e.g., [Devarim 8:6](#); 19:9; 26:17; [I Shmuel 8:5](#); 15:20; [I Melakhim 2:3](#); 15:26; [II Melakhim 8:18](#); 16:3; [Yeshayahu 8:11](#); [Tehillim 128:1](#); [Mishlei 1:15](#); 2:20; 16:29; [II Divrei Ha-Yamim 6:31](#); 11:17.

5 [5] R. Barukh Epstein in his *Torah Temima* ([Ruth 1](#), fn. 36) suggests that the description of their walking on the road should be contrasted to Yaakov’s lifting up his feet and going ([Bereishit 29:1](#)), which denotes haste and lightness of feet. The description of walking on the road suggests heaviness and exhaustion, which is explained by the *midrash* as a result of the difficulty in walking with bare feet.

6 [6] Unsurprisingly, there are attempts to reconcile this *midrash* with Naomi’s presumed piety. The *Torah Temima* (ad loc.) maintains that this is an indication of Naomi’s great love for the land of Israel and excitement to return: “And one may say that the reason that they walked on the holiday is because entrance into the land of Israel was so beloved to them; therefore they hurried in their journey and they thought that it was permissible even to [do this] on a holiday. It is possible that they intended to correct the sin of the departure of their husbands from Israel to the Diaspora.” We have seen conflicting readings with regard to Naomi’s enthusiasm in returning to Israel. More to the point, the words of the *midrash*, “they **transgressed** the way of the law,” do not appear designed to excuse Naomi’s actions. Instead, this *midrash* seems intent on describing Naomi trampling on the law “the proper path” on her way home.

namely, that Naomi was absorbed with the laws of converts throughout her journey home.

This *midrash*, with its extreme variances, is a telling indicator of the conflicting approaches in understanding Naomi's persona. Naomi remains a subject of controversy in the Midrash. It remains to be seen whether a careful analysis of the text can sway our perception of Naomi in one direction or another.

## The Townspeople

The attitude of the townspeople to Naomi is not entirely clear. The nature of their feelings toward Naomi is not resolved by their inscrutable question, "Is this Naomi?" It is impossible to know the tone of the people's question merely by reading it in a text. Was this query posed in shock, glee, mockery, excitement, horror, curiosity, sympathy, or anger?

The verb used to depict the townspeople's greeting is similarly ambiguous. In translating the word *va-teihom*, I used the phrase, "tumultuously greeted." Other translations render, "The whole city buzzed with excitement,"<sup>7</sup> or "All the city was astir."<sup>8</sup> The word *hom* can depict a response to a loud noise ([I Shmuel 4:5](#)), confusion or a tumult ([Shemot 14:24](#); [Shoftim 4:15](#)), pity ([Yirmiyahu 31:19](#)), fear ([Tehillim 55:3](#)), or even excitement. Many of the above-mentioned places in which this verb appears are likewise ambiguous as to its meaning. Thus, we cannot positively ascertain the mood of the crowd who came to greet Naomi and Ruth.

Nevertheless, it appears that the townspeople maintain a negative outlook toward Naomi, at the very least when Naomi first returns to town. Naomi's defensive response to their question, in which she delineates her misery and the punishment that she has received from God, speaks volumes about the tone of their question. It is as though Naomi fends off their antagonism by saying,

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7 [7] See, e.g., *New Jewish Publication Society* and *The Anchor Bible*.

8 [8] See, e.g., *The Jerusalem Bible* and *The Revised King James Bible*.

have already received just recompense for those things that have aroused your ire.â€•

Moreover, the townspeople do not respond to Naomiâ€™s bitter, heartbreaking speech. They seem to gaze silently after her as Naomi trudges off in the aftermath of her painful monologue. Indeed, the townspeople seem willing to abandon Naomi to her fate. They never welcome her with homecoming cakes, food, or offers of assistance, despite the fact that she has no husband or sons, no planted fields, and consequently, no means of sustenance.<sup>9</sup>[9] In fact, no more words are exchanged between Naomi and her former neighbors until Boaz publicly marries Ruth, facilitating Naomiâ€™s newfound acceptance.

In an attempt to reveal the nature of the townspeopleâ€™s enigmatic question, a *midrash* offers the following elucidation, in which the townspeople reveal their astonishment (perhaps with an undercurrent of *Schadenfreude*) at the enormity of Naomiâ€™s loss: 10 [10]

And they said, â€œIs this Naomi?!â€• This [is the] one whose deeds were agreeable and pleasant?! In the past, she used to travel in her litter with a canopy, and now she walks barefoot! She used to be covered in clothes of fine wool, and now she is covered in rags. She used to have a ruddy face because of the vigor [she derived from] food and drink, and now her face is sallow because of hunger. (*Ruth Rabba* 3:6)<sup>11</sup>[11]

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9 [9] Naomiâ€™s situation is so dire that Ruth must go pick as a pauper in the field in order to obtain food ([Ruth 2:2](#)).

10 [10] The *midrash* may base its explication of the content and tone of the townspeopleâ€™s question on the fact that the text attributes this question to the women of the town (*va-tomarna*). Perhaps it is the women who would be most negatively struck by Naomiâ€™s supercilious departure, decked out in her fancy jewels and clothes, while the people had nothing to eat. It is therefore the women who may be most gleeful at this haughty womanâ€™s downfall.

11 [11] A similar *midrash* likewise perceives this question as an incredulous one (*Ruth Zuta* 1:19; *Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 1*): â€œAll of the daughters of Bethlehem were astonished by Naomi. And they said â€˜Is this Naomi?!â€™ For the daughters of Bethlehem used to [borrow] her jewelry. â€˜Is this Naomi who would make gold appear ugly because of the beauty of her face?!â€™â€•

Another *midrash* perceives in this question a comment on Naomi's just recompense:

And they said, "Is this Naomi?" What does it mean, "Is this Naomi?" R. Yitzchak said: They said, "Have you seen Naomi who left the land to go to the Diaspora, what has happened to her?" (*Bava Batra* 91a)

Both of these *midrashim* draw upon the lack of warmth attending Naomi's reception, and suggest a tone of resentment in the words of the townspeople. In this schema, a residual ill-will exists in Bethlehem against the family who left them during the famine.

The *Yerushalmi* asks why, in fact, the townspeople went out to greet Naomi at all:

And is it possible that the entire city came out to greet this wretched woman? But on the same day, Boaz's wife died and they all went to [bury her]. (*Yerushalmi* [Ketuvot 1:1](#))

The people, explains the *midrash*, did not go to greet Naomi at all! Rather they happened to be on the outskirts of the city on that day, attending to the funeral of Boaz's wife. This *midrash* is primarily interested in portraying the manner in which the stage was set for Ruth's marriage to Boaz even before her arrival.<sup>12</sup>[12] In this context, however, the *midrash* also comments on the unlikelihood that anyone would bother themselves to come and greet Naomi, *persona non grata*, on her return to Bethlehem.

## Naomi

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<sup>12</sup> [12] See, for example, [Bava Batra 91a](#); *Yalkut Shimoni* [Ruth 1](#) (601).

The primary question that we will address in examining Naomi's character is in regard to her view of herself. Naomi speaks quite a bit in this chapter, and by paying careful attention to her words, we can acquire a deeper understanding of the manner in which the text depicts her self-perception. There is little doubt regarding Naomi's bitterness and sense of loss. She twice uses the word "bitter" in a self-referential context, a word often used in *Tanakh* to describe a woman without children and without continuity.<sup>13</sup>[13]

Naomi's apprehension of God is worthy of further consideration.<sup>14</sup>[14] Strikingly, Naomi often refers to God as the source of her misery. In her speech to her daughters-in-law, Naomi declares that "the hand of God has gone out against me." Similarly, in Naomi's tragic monologue to the townspeople, she attributes four separate actions to God: "Sha-ddai has embittered me terribly! God has returned me empty! God has testified against me (*ana vi*), and Sha-ddai has done evil to me" ([Ruth 1:20-21](#)).

Naomi's repeated mention of God's role in her tragedy may not necessarily be meant as a criticism of a harsh, unforgiving God. In fact, the text does not make it clear whether Naomi feels that she deserves God's punishments or that she is an innocent victim of a merciless God.<sup>15</sup>[15] The *midrash* likewise records a controversy in regard to the meaning of Naomi's words, "God has testified against me (*ana vi*)."<sup>15</sup> This controversy is focused on the word *ana*, which has several possible meanings in Hebrew:

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<sup>13</sup> [13] E.g., *I Shmuel* 1:10; [II Kings 4:27](#); *Eikha* 1:4.

<sup>14</sup> [14] Naomi's declaration that she is "too old to be with a man" is reminiscent of Sara's similar statement in [Bereishit 18:12](#). God's angry response to Sara, "Is anything too wondrous for God?" may be applied to Naomi's words as well. The women's declaration at the end of this story, "A son has been born to Naomi" ([Ruth 4:17](#)), can be seen as a negation of Naomi's skeptical pronouncement. This may contain a slight textual criticism of Naomi, implicitly accusing her of not sufficiently trusting in God's capability to redeem and restore her.

<sup>15</sup> [15] The *Targum* ([Ruth 1:19](#)) leaves little doubt that Naomi feels that she deserves her fate: "Why do you call me Naomi, since from before the Lord my sin has testified against me?"

â€œHashem ana vi.â€• [He] persecuted me with the trait of strict justice, as it says ([Shemot 22](#)), â€œif you shall afflict him (*im aneh te* <sup>TM</sup>*aneh oto*).â€•

Another explanation: â€œHashem ana vi,â€• He testified against me, as it says ([Devarim 19](#)), â€œHe testified falsely against his brother (*sheker ana be-achiv*).â€•

Another explanation: â€œHashem ana vi,â€• All of his occupations (*inyaneha* [sic]) [were against me] because in this world, God afflicts me, but in the future it is surely written ([Yirmiyahu 32](#)), â€œAnd I will rejoice over you to do good to you.â€• ([Ruth Rabba 3:7](#))

The first two explanations in the *midrash* are straightforward. The first one suggests that the word *ana* is identical to the word that appears in [Shemot 22:22](#), meaning to persecute, afflict, or torture.<sup>16</sup>[16] In this reading, Naomi perceives God harshly, as her tormenter, inflicting pain upon her regardless of whether she is deserving of it. The text used to support this approach corroborates this reading. It is a verse that prohibits the affliction of a widow or orphan. As a widow, Naomi can rightly expect gentler treatment from God, whom she accuses of tormenting her, despite her vulnerable position. The second possibility tendered by the *midrash* proposes that *ana* means to testify.<sup>17</sup>[17] In this reading, Naomi is not accusing God, but submitting an admission of culpability. Indeed, God has meted out to her a terrible punishment, but not because He wishes to torment her. Rather, God has testified against her, and she has been found guilty, resulting in the inevitable, just punishment.

In addressing the phrase â€œHashem ana vi,â€• Ibn Ezra attempts to resolve the argument ([Ruth 1:21](#)):

â€œHashem ana vi.â€• There are those who say that this derives from the word(s), â€œto be tortured by.â€• In my opinion, it is derived from, â€œDo not testify [falsely] against your brother.â€•

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<sup>16</sup> [16] For the use of the word in this way, see also, for example, [Devarim 22:24](#), 29; [II Shmuel 13:22](#); [Eikha 3:33](#).

<sup>17</sup> [17] The words *ana* is used in this manner in the Ninth Commandment ([Shemot 20:13](#); [Devarim 5:17](#)). For other similar uses, see, for example, [II Shmuel 1:16](#); [Mishlei 25:18](#).



In siding with the second opinion in the *midrash*, Ibn Ezra displays his customary literary sensitivity. The word *ana* is a homonym, containing two separate meanings. Nevertheless, every time in which it is directly followed by the preposition *be* (or *ve*), it means to testify against someone. In this case, the word *ana* is followed by *vi*, and therefore means to testify.

While the Ibn Ezra may have clarified the actual meaning of the text,<sup>18</sup>[18] the controversy within the *midrash* still draws our attention to the complexities inherent in Naomi's situation. The multiple interpretations of Naomi's attitude towards God and her terrible punishment are further enriched by turning our attention to the final explanation in the *midrash*. The third explication of the phrase *“Hasehem ana vi”* is the least well-founded of the three explanations. The *midrash* seems to recognize this by not presuming to offer a proof-text for this reading. Moreover, the etymological relationship between the word *ana* and the word *inyan* is questionable.<sup>19</sup>[19] Therefore this explanation is particularly worthy of note. What idea are *Chazal* so eager to convey that they are willing to stray from the simple meaning of the word?

This approach proposes that God was occupied all day with afflicting Naomi. At first glance, this would seem to be in keeping with the first approach, in which Naomi views herself as a victim of a merciless, relentless God. Nevertheless, this *midrash* continues by stating that these events expiate Naomi's sin, leaving her free to reap the rewards in the future. This attitude toward misery and troubles is an efficacious one, in which *Chazal* use Naomi, her situation, and her words to convey a message of hope for all people in their time of travail.<sup>20</sup>[20] Do not worry, *Chazal* advise, the worse your life is now, the more

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18 [18] Because of the compelling reason provided by the Ibn Ezra, I have consistently translated the phrase *ana vi* as “testified against me.”

19 [19] The book of *Kohelet* (1:3 and 3:10) actually does suggest a relationship between the root *ana* and the word *inyan*.

20 [20] It is significant, therefore, that the verse employed to support this reading is from one of the rare prophecies of consolation in Jeremiah (a book known for its prophecies of doom; see [Bava Batra 14b](#)). It is especially noteworthy that the context of this uplifting prophecy is the terrible calamity that will precede the revival.

reward will be yours in the future. Indeed, this positive message has resonated throughout Jewish history, strengthening many individuals in difficult times.<sup>21</sup>[21]

### The Name of God: *Sha-ddai*

In her bitter monologue at the entrance to Bethlehem, Naomi twice employs an unusual name of God, *Sha-ddai*. This name is frequently used by Iyov.<sup>22</sup>[22] More significantly, *Sha-ddai* is explicitly associated with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov ([Shemot 6:2-3](#)):

And God spoke to Moshe, and He said to him, "I am the Lord."<sup>23</sup>[23] And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov with [My name] *E-I Sha-ddai*, but My name Lord, I did not make known to them.

God's statement that He did not appear to the forefathers with His name, the Tetragrammaton, does not seem to be textually accurate. The

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21 [21] This approach strikingly recalls the famous story of R. Akiva comforting his colleagues in the aftermath of the *Churban* by assuring them that the bad times herald the good ([Makkot 24b](#)).

22 [22] Naomi and Iyov are analogous in other ways as well. Both of these biblical characters begin their lives with everything and lose it all, only to rebuild it once again. A salient linguistic parallel is Naomi's statement ([Ruth 1:20](#)): "And *Sha-ddai* embittered me greatly," which is analogous to Iyov's statement, "I swear... by *Sha-ddai* who embittered my soul" ([Iyov 27:2](#)). Many have noted the similarities between these characters. Most recently, R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), pp. 11-12, has discussed this topic. One may infer from this parallel that Naomi, like Iyov, regards herself as an innocent victim. This approach corresponds with the first opinion cited in the above *midrash*.

23 [23] As in the previous *shiur*, in order to maintain clarity, I use the term "Lord" when the text employs the Tetragrammaton.

Tetragrammaton appears quite frequently in association with the forefathers, even as part of God's self-introduction ([Bereishit 15:7](#)):<sup>24</sup>[24]

And He said to him, "I am the Lord who has taken you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land as an inheritance."

It seems that God's words to Moshe relate to a certain aspect of God that was not revealed until the story of the exodus from Egypt.<sup>25</sup>[25] Indeed, many scholars associate the Tetragrammaton with the God of the nation, only formed during the exodus from Egypt.<sup>26</sup>[26] In this schema, the divine name *Sha-ddai* emerges as a personal God, unassociated with any national entity.<sup>27</sup>[27]

While this makes sense in terms of the forefathers, who were not yet part of a nation, it is less valid with respect to Naomi. It is possible that the use of this name is an indication that Naomi does not include herself within any sort of national entity. In abandoning the people of Bethlehem, perhaps Naomi simultaneously excludes herself from the nation of Israel.<sup>28</sup>[28] Of course, Naomi does use the

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<sup>24</sup> [24] See also [Bereishit 28:13](#), where God introduces Himself to Yaakov using the Tetragrammaton.

<sup>25</sup> [25] See, e.g., Ibn Ezra (*Ha-Arokh*) 6:3.

<sup>26</sup> [26] See e.g. Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (1961), pp. 18, 23, 31.

<sup>27</sup> [27] Rabbinic literature offers different explanations for this name of God. One common approach is to parse the word by regarding the *shin* as a preposition (meaning, "that [says]" ) and the next two letters as the word *dai*, meaning enough. The result is a portrayal of God instructing the world not to continue to expand during creation ([Bereishit Rabba 5:8](#); [Chagiga 12a](#)). Later exegetes refer similarly to God's power over nature, although often specifically within the context of fertility (e.g. Radak, [Bereishit 17:1](#); *Ba'al Ha-Turim*, [Shemot 6:2](#)).

<sup>28</sup> [28] We noted above that Iyov frequently employs the name *Sha-ddai*. It is interesting that R. Soloveitchik condemns Iyov for this very type of selfishness, maintaining that Iyov did not properly see himself as a member of the general community. See *Kol Dodi Dofek*, pp. 58-62. It is only when Iyov is "delivered from the straits of egoism" that he begins to live "the life of the community" and he can extricate himself from his afflictions. Both quotes are from p. 62.

Tetragrammaton as well, but this twofold employment of *Sha-ddai* remains her trademark, an unusual usage that may well define her relationship with God.

There is one final indication within Naomi's description of herself that indicates that she is remiss in her self-absorbed behavior. A seminal phrase in her speech, "I went full and God has returned me empty," contains several peculiarities. While Hebrew syntax generally puts the subject first, the second part of the sentence awkwardly places the subject at the end: "I went full and empty returned me God." Moreover, the word I (*ani*), which is placed at the beginning of the sentence, is repetitive, inasmuch as the word *halakhti* (I went) contains the first person. It seems that this phrase is consciously designed to open with Naomi's *ani*, her focus on herself, and to close with a reference to God.<sup>29</sup>[29] In a strikingly allusive manner, Naomi may be explaining why she deserves her miserable situation. In fact, she seems to suggest, it was the "my selfishness, my focus on my own needs, which caused my departure, while the final say was had by God, who justly brought about the shameful state of my return.

In the final analysis, it seems that Naomi's perceptiveness enables her to fathom the reason for her state of affairs. In doing so, she recognizes the divine punishment in her situation and, in keeping with the Ibn Ezra's understanding of the words, "*Hashem ana vi*," admits that her personal situation is justified by her previous actions. In other words, examining the text yields the conclusion that Naomi maintains her belief in God, and even comprehends the reason for her own dismal state.

Nevertheless, rabbinic literature picks up on an underlying impression that Naomi is not entirely at peace with her relationship with God. There is a lingering sense that Naomi's bitterness is directed not just at herself but also outward at God. Once again, a complex portrait of Naomi emerges, one that is fraught with the complexities inherent in being human. And once again, Naomi's complex representation mirrors that of the nation at this time. Their dire circumstances are certainly portrayed as a consequence of their own actions. At the same, however, the nation cannot help but point a bitter, accusatory finger towards God, who is ultimately responsible for the catastrophe of the period of the Judges: "Why God, oh God of Israel, has this happened in Israel?" ([Shoftim 21:3](#)).

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<sup>29</sup> [29] A similar phenomenon is discernable in the third chapter of *Megillat Eikha*, which opens with the word *ani* and closes with the name of God.

*This series of shiurim is dedicated to the memory of my mother Naomi Ruth ז"ל • I 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](mailto:yaelziegler@gmail.com)

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