

**MEGILLAT RUTH**  
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Dedicated in memory of Joseph Y. Nadler, z'l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi.  
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**Shiur #26: Ruth: The Woman of Valor**

**The Woman of Valor Who Surpassed them All**

Over the course of the narrative, Ruth is accorded various appellations, including: Moavite, *shifkha*, *ama*, woman, and daughter-in-law. Perhaps her most memorable designation is “*eshet chayil*,” a woman of valor. Ruth is the only character in the *Tanakh* termed as such, and this accolade seems to be reserved for a truly ideal woman. The term *chayil* suggests Ruth’s strength, integrity, loyalty, honesty, leadership, and efficiency.<sup>[1]</sup>

Although Boaz couches this appellation as the opinion of the people in the gate, it is Boaz who calls Ruth a woman of valor. It is therefore of particular significance that this description mirrors the one used about Boaz himself in *Ruth* 2:1.<sup>[2]</sup> This equates Ruth with Boaz, suggesting that her behavior sets her on par with the venerable Judean leader. It also hints at their compatibility, and the possibility of creating a marriage between equals.

The description of Ruth as a woman of valor recalls the *eshet chayil* of *Mishlei* 31.<sup>[3]</sup> The description of the ideal wife in that chapter conveys an image of an industrious, kind, noble, dignified woman, whose praise is sung by her husband and children. The image of the *eshet chayil* in *Mishlei* 31 coheres well with Ruth’s persona.<sup>[4]</sup> Ruth’s industriousness, indicated by her willingness to work in the fields from the morning (*Ruth* 2:7) until the evening (*Ruth* 2:17), corresponds to the predominant description of the hardworking *eshet chayil* (*Mishlei* 31:13-16, 18-19, 27). Ruth’s generosity toward the embittered and impoverished Naomi evokes the *eshet chayil*’s generosity toward the poor (*Mishlei* 31:20). Ruth’s *chesed* generally mirrors the *eshet chayil*, whose *chesed* is upon her tongue (*Mishlei* 31:26). Ruth brings good to both Naomi (*Ruth* 4:15) and Boaz (*Ruth* 3:10), just as the *eshet chayil* brings good to her husband (*Mishlei* 31:12).<sup>[5]</sup>

The poem’s minimization of beauty (“Grace is false and beauty is vain.” *Mishlei* 31:30) is also intriguing, given our observation that the Megilla never offers any physical description of Ruth herself. The description of the *eshet chayil* who gets up while it is still night (“*va-takom be-od layla*,” *Mishlei* 31:15) recalls Ruth arising

(*va-takom*) before it is light enough to recognize someone (*Ruth* 3:14). Key words in our narrative (*lechem, na'arot, and sadeh*) appear in the poem in *Mishlei* as well, thereby creating an associative connection. Boaz's name is actually hinted to in the poem ("*chagera be-oz motneha*"), a wordplay which seems to be noted by a midrash.<sup>[6]</sup> Ruth's general outward dignity and wise speech likewise evoke the description of the *eshet chayil* (*Mishlei* 31:21-22, 25-26). Significantly, the climax of the poem is that this ideal woman will be rewarded and praised for her acts in the gates (*Mishlei* 31:31), corresponding closely to Boaz's words about the people of the gate (*Ruth* 3:11). Moreover, the assembly which gathers in the gate in chapter four blesses and praises Ruth (*Ruth* 4:11-12).

A midrash recognizes the general connection, offering one interpretation of the poem of *Mishlei* 31 as a reference to Ruth:

"Many women have done valor, but you surpass them all." This is Ruth the Moabite, who entered under the wings of God.

"Grace is false and beauty is vain." [This refers to Ruth,] who left her mother and father and her wealth and went with her mother-in-law and accepted all of the commandments...

Therefore, the poem [concludes], "Extol her for the fruit of her hand and let her works praise her in the gates." (*Midrash Mishlei* 31:29-30)

Indeed, if Ruth is the ultimate *eshet chayil*, she can anticipate several salient rewards. Apart from the admiring praise of her husband and children (*Mishlei* 31:28) – which, after all, is the goal of *Megillat Ruth* – Ruth will have the honor of a husband who is "known in the gates, as he sits with the elders of the land" (*Mishlei* 31:32). This description certainly evokes Boaz (*Ruth* 4:1-2), who, in calling Ruth an *eshet chayil*, offers himself (or his like) to serve as a fitting partner for this woman of exemplary character.

### **"Let It Not Be Known"**

And she slept at his feet until the morning. And she arose before a man could recognize his friend and he said, "Let it not be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." And he said, "Give me the kerchief which is upon you and grasp hold of it." And she grasped hold of it. He measured six barleys and he placed it upon her and he came to the city. (*Ruth* 3:14-15)

Boaz's concluding acts in this chapter recall his previous acts of piety and magnanimity. While it appears that Ruth rises early of her own accord, it is Boaz who endeavors to conceal the events. Boaz's use of the word *yada*, as in, "Let it not be known," is an ironic and resonant conclusion to Naomi's attempt to conceal knowledge from Boaz at the beginning of this chapter ("Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking," *Ruth* 3:3).<sup>[7]</sup> Boaz refuses to allow himself to

be deceived, and instead, insists on his own knowledge. Nevertheless, he is staunchly determined to withhold knowledge from anyone who would misinterpret Ruth's conduct.

The lengths to which Boaz is willing to go to ensure secrecy are advanced by a midrash:

And he said, "Give me the kerchief" (*Ruth* 3:15). [Though "Give" is read in the feminine form], it is written in the masculine form.<sup>[8]</sup> This teaches that he addressed her in a masculine form so that no creature would sense [that a woman is in the field]. (*Ruth Rabba* 7:2)

To what end does Boaz so assiduously seek to suppress this story from becoming public knowledge? Based on our previous analyses of Boaz's behavior, it seems evident that Boaz wishes to preserve Ruth's reputation. Boaz's concern for Ruth is evident throughout the narrative.<sup>[9]</sup>

Nevertheless, we should examine two other possible reasons for Boaz's quest for secrecy. One midrash suggests that Boaz's primary concern is the profanation of God's name.

"And he said, 'Let it not be known that a woman came...'" To whom did he say this?<sup>[10]</sup> R. Meir said: To his household. R. Huna said: That entire night, Boaz was prostrated on his face, and he said, "Master of the Universe, it is known and revealed before You that I did not touch her. Let it be Your will, God... that it should not be known that a woman came to the threshing floor so that the name of heaven should not be profaned because of me." (*Ruth Rabba* 7:1)

This reading coheres with earlier presentations of Boaz's piety and his primary concern with God, as is evident, for example, by the fact that the name of God is the first word that issues out of Boaz's mouth in our narrative (*Ruth* 2:4).<sup>[11]</sup> Boaz's acts are motivated by the name of God, which is constantly on his mind and lips. It comes as no surprise that a midrashic reading assumes that Boaz's primary concern is with God.

Rashi, however, adduces one final idea, which is somewhat surprising:

"And he said, 'Let it not be known.'" This rests upon [the previous words], "And she arose before [a man] could recognize [his friend]." He hurried to get up, for he said to himself, "It is not honorable for me that it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." (Rashi, *Ruth* 3:14)

This reading does not appear to reflect Boaz's character as it has been presented in the *Megilla* thus far. Suggesting that Boaz is concerned for his own honor seems to impugn Boaz's character.<sup>[12]</sup> It does not appear characteristic of Boaz to be so concerned for himself. Why, then, does Rashi suggest that this is Boaz's goal? I am at a

loss to explain this anomalous interpretation, and I would be happy to hear if any of my readers have an idea to explain Rashi's unlikely reading.

## Six Barleys

As in the previous chapter, Boaz hands Ruth food at the conclusion of their encounter.<sup>[13]</sup> Unlike the last chapter, however, the goal of this chapter is not to obtain food, but marriage and continuity. Why, then, does Boaz give Ruth food at the conclusion of this chapter? It may well be that nothing that Boaz could offer Ruth could actually represent his intangible offer to obtain for her marriage and redemption.<sup>[14]</sup> It is possible that Boaz gave Ruth barley as an attempt to mask the nature of her clandestine visit to the threshing floor. If she returned carrying barley, anyone who would see her would assume that her poverty compelled her to work overtime to glean as much grain as she could.<sup>[15]</sup>

The idea underlying Boaz's gift may be explained by a peculiar omission. Unlike in *Ruth* 2:17, the verse leaves out the unit of measure of the barley which Boaz gives her. Rabbinic sources and contemporary Bible scholars seek the measure intended but not specified in the verse. Scholars reject the possibility that the narrative refers to six *ephah* of barley (as in *Ruth* 2:17) on the grounds that it would be prohibitively heavy.<sup>[16]</sup> Anomer (one tenth of an *ephah*) is deemed to be too small an amount. Most scholars therefore settle on the *se'ah* (approximately one third of an *ephah*), an opinion which is already found in the Targum and *Sanhedrin* 93b.

This discussion revolves around the attempt to establish the historical reality, the actual quantity of barley that Boaz gave to Ruth. More interesting for our purposes is the literary-theological question: *Why* does the text omit the measurement? If this is in fact an intentional omission, how does it deepen our understanding of the underlying goals and messages of the narrative? A possible answer is that the text actually means to say that Boaz gave Ruth six barleys – that is, six stalks of barley, a miniscule amount! Why would Boaz give Ruth an inadequate amount of grain? Perhaps Boaz wishes to convey to Ruth that he intends to act immediately on her behalf. By giving her grain that will not suffice for even one meal, Boaz means to tell her that before she has finished consuming that grain, he will already have made new arrangements for her provision.<sup>[17]</sup>

In keeping with the theme of the chapter, I would like to offer another possible understanding. Boaz may have intended the six stalks of barley to have symbolic, rather than pragmatic, value. In other words, he does not give her the barley for her to eat, but rather to symbolize the children and continuity that she will obtain as a result of the events in this chapter.<sup>[18]</sup> This is the approach of many rabbinic interpretations of this verse:

Why is it written (*Ruth* 3), "He gave me these six barleys"? Why six barleys? If it actually means six barleys, is this Boaz's custom to give a gift of six barleys? It means six *se'ah* of barley. And is it the way of a woman to carry six *se'ah* of barley? It means that he gave her a hint that six

children will be born from her in the future. Each of them will be blessed with six blessings. These are they: David, Messiah, Daniel, Chananya, Mishael, and Azaria. (*Sanhedrin* 93a-b)<sup>[19]</sup>

This symbolic meaning corresponds better with the theme of the chapter and creates another parallel between chapter two and chapter three. In chapter two, after Boaz provides for Ruth's long-term sustenance, he offers her a meal, representative of his guarantee to provide food. In chapter three, after Boaz promises Ruth to find her marriage and security, he offers her six stalks of barley, representative of his guarantee to provide her with continuity.

One literary clue which may point to this interpretation is the unusual verb employed to describe Boaz placing food in Ruth's possession (*Ruth* 3:15). The verb, *va-yashet*, appears once again at the end of the *Megilla*. Oved, the child born to Ruth and Boaz, is placed (*va-teshiteihu*) by Naomi in her bosom (*Ruth* 4:16). It transpires, therefore, that the correspondence between the barley and the child has a textual basis.

The motif of food runs parallel to the motif of children in *Megillat Ruth*.<sup>[20]</sup> Both emerge from a *zera*, a seed, and both are essential for reversing Naomi's tragedy. The combination of chapter two (which resolves Naomi's problem of lack of food) and chapter three (which resolves Naomi's problem of the lack of an heir) together facilitate chapter four, in which the Naomi's tragic predicament will find a felicitous resolution.

*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.*

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<sup>[1]</sup> We examined the multiple meanings of the word *chayil* in *shiur* #12.

<sup>[2]</sup> This mirroring of Boaz and Ruth is noted by a midrash in *Ruth Rabba* 4:1. We will examine the general theme of the mirror imaging between Ruth and Boaz in a later *shiur*.

<sup>[3]</sup> While the simple meaning of this chapter is a poem of praise for an ideal wife, some biblical commentators have interpreted *Mishlei* 31 as a praise of wisdom (Ralbag, *Mishlei* 31:10) or Torah (e.g. Rashi, *Mishlei* 31:10).

<sup>[4]</sup> In establishing a relationship between these texts, I am suggesting that this connection is deliberate and meaningful. I will leave aside issues of dating and the related question of which text came first and interpreted the other. I am more interested in the meaning of the parallels and how they impact upon our understanding of Ruth.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ruth does not simply act in a good way towards Naomi. She also appears to be the catalyst for transforming Naomi's experience from an evil one (*Ruth* 1:21) to a good one (*Ruth* 2:22; 4:15).

<sup>[6]</sup> Several *midrashim* use the phrase "*chagera motneha*" to describe the manner in which Ruth tied her kerchief on herself in *Ruth* 3:15 (e.g. *Ruth Rabba* 7:15). By employing this phrase, the midrash creates a parallel between Ruth and the verse in *Mishlei* 31:17. This parallel is especially compelling given its use of the word *be-oz*, recalling Boaz.

<sup>[7]</sup> The *niphal* form of the verb common to both verses further confirms this parallel.

<sup>[8]</sup> According to the *Matanot Kehuna* (a commentary to the *Midrash Rabba* written by R. Yissacher Ber HaKohen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century), this midrash is based on a manuscript which has the word “*hava*” instead of “*havi*.”

<sup>[9]</sup> *Midrashim* amplify Boaz’s solicitous attitude toward Ruth, bolstering and enlarging its central role in the narrative. One example that we have not yet seen is a midrash which depicts Boaz following Ruth on her journey back to Naomi in order to ensure that no one harms her on the way (*Ruth Rabba* 7:3).

<sup>[10]</sup> Textually, this question is unnecessary, as there are many places in the biblical narrative in which the verb *amar* describes a person’s inner reflections. See e.g. *Bereishit* 20:11; 26:9; *I Shemuel* 20:26; *II Shemuel* 12:22; *II Melakhim* 5:11. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), pp. 67-69. Alter maintains that thought is almost invariably rendered as actual speech, and he offers several explanations for this phenomenon.

<sup>[11]</sup> We discussed this central feature of Boaz’s persona in *shiur* #13.

<sup>[12]</sup> The phrase *ein kevodi*, literally, “it is not my honor,” appears in several *midrashim* with respect to David. In those *midrashim*, David finishes the sentence, “but in God’s honor.” In other words, David uses the phrase to dismiss his own honor in deference to God’s honor. The only other person in midrashic literature who uses this phrase to preserve his own honor is Bil’am, a rather unflattering parallel for Boaz.

<sup>[13]</sup> The significance of this is implied by the fact that, upon her return to Naomi (in both chapters), Ruth focuses on displaying the gift that Boaz gave her, rather than on recounting her other interactions with Boaz.

<sup>[14]</sup> One scholar has suggested that Boaz symbolically covered her with his garment (e.g. Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* [1988], p. 219). However, this would belie Boaz’s intention, which is to give the other *go’el* the first opportunity to fulfill his responsibility to marry her.

<sup>[15]</sup> See, e.g., Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (1988), p. 222. This explanation seems unlikely to me. No young woman would reasonably remain in the fields all night long during the time of the Judges, both because it was dangerous and because any woman outside after dark was suspected of untoward intentions (e.g. *Mishlei* 7:9-10.)

<sup>[16]</sup> Determining the exact size of biblical measures is not possible with certainty. Based on archeological evidence, as well as some textual evidence (see Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* [Anchor Bible, 1975], p. 104), scholars estimate that six *ephah* of barley would weigh anywhere between 180-300 pounds! If this is so, then an *omer* should be between 18 and 30 pounds. Estimates for a *se’ah* range from 60 to 100 pounds, a heavy but reasonable load for Ruth. See Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Word Biblical Commentary, 1996), p. 178.

<sup>[17]</sup> Malbim on *Ruth* 3:15 says something similar to this.

<sup>[18]</sup> This reading coheres with a general correspondence between food and children, fertility of the land and fertility of the human, which is an important theme in the book of *Ruth* and in *Tanakh* in general.

<sup>[19]</sup> Other versions of this midrash may be found in the Targum on *Ruth* 3:15; *Ruth Rabba* 7:3; Rashi on *Ruth* 3:15.

<sup>[20]</sup> As noted, this is a ubiquitous and essential theme in the *Tanakh*. While it is beyond the scope of this *shiur* to properly develop this theme, one interesting example of this parallel is the manner in which the land of Egypt is represented in the *Tanakh* – as a country both of plentiful food and plentiful fertility (see *Shemot* 1:7). On the flip side, the land of Israel is a place where man must depend upon God for the land to produce plentiful food (*Devarim* 11:10-12). Intriguingly, human fertility is also presented as difficult to attain in the Land of Israel. Yaakov must go to Mesopotamia (a land of fertility) or Egypt to produce children easily. It transpires that the Land of Israel requires dependence upon God for fertility of the land and for human fertility as well (see e.g. *Bereishit Rabba* 45:4), which can account for its centrality in maintaining a suitable man-God relationship.