

MEGILLAT RUTH By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #32: Boaz: If the Go'el's Shoe Fits...

And this was what was formerly done in Israel with regard to *geula* and transfer (*temura*); in order to establish any transaction, a man would remove his shoe and give it to his fellow. This was the attestation in Israel. (*Ruth* 4:7)

The Narrator's Note

This unusual editorial comment offers a parenthetical note to the story, recalling a customary practice in ancient Israel: in cases involving redemption or exchange, a shoe was used to ratify the transaction.

Modern scholarship tends to assume that the author wrote this book long after the events it describes.^[1] The comment is therefore offered to an audience who were presumably no longer familiar with this practice. Alternatively, one could suggest that *Megillat Ruth* implies that Boaz has revived a neglected custom, one that has not been practiced for many years.^[2] The word "*lefanim*" ("formerly") could imply an ancient custom^[3] or one that was observed in the recent past, even less than a generation previous.^[4] While it is impossible to conclude when this custom was abandoned, we are left with the sense that Israel has abandoned and forgotten its legal practices.^[5] This recalls the religious deterioration of the period of the Judges and suggests that customs have fallen out of use in this period.^[6] Thus, this verse may be inserted to indicate the manner in which *Megillat Ruth* rehabilitates the nation socially and religiously and restores its ancient traditions.

The manner in which the verse interrupts the narrative motivates me to ask a different sort of question: What is the literary role of this comment? Why does the *Megilla* pause, quite in the middle of the *go'el's* speech, to offer this explanation? Hubbard suggests that this verse offers a literary pause between the *go'el's* refusal and the formal legal ceremony. Indeed, the *go'el's* refusal constitutes a moment of tension in the narrative. The solemn and formal nature of this verse enables the events that follow it to appear both official and legitimate.^[7] In fact, the verse has a formal opening and closing, beginning with the words "*ve-zot lefanim be-Yisrael*" and ending with the words "*ve-zot ha-teuda be-Yisrael.*" This, along with its rhythmic verbal assonance (*ha-geula, ha-temura, ha-teuda*) lends the verse a ceremonious air.

We should also examine the substance of this exceptional comment within the context of the narrative. Presumably, this rare statement is also designed to draw our attention to its specific details. This certainly appears to be the case with regard to a remarkably similar biblical verse:

Formerly (*lefanim*) in Israel, this is what a man would say when he was going to seek [an oracle] of God: “Let us go to the Seer (*ha-ro’eh*),” for the [man who is called a] prophet (*navi*) today was formerly [called] a Seer. (*I Shemuel* 9:9)

This narratorial comment directs our attention to an important motif in *I Shemuel*: the motif of sight. While the statement is presented in an unemotional fashion, the conclusion is that prophetic sight (and thereby insight) is not what it once was.^[8] In fact, this will prove to be the substance of God’s rebuke of Shemuel later in the narrative (*I Shemuel* 16:7), where the root for the word sight (*ra’ah*) appears four times. God’s chastisement may even hint that Shemuel’s lack of insight underlies Shaul’s fall. In a similar fashion, the editorial comment in *Megillat Ruth* draws our attention to the legal transactions of *geula*,^[9] *temura*,^[10] and especially the shoe.

The Shoe

What is the purpose of the shoe? Does it have a symbolic meaning? In what other circumstances do shoes appear in *Tanakh*?

The common usage of the shoe suggests that its role may be specifically related to assuming or relinquishing possession of property.^[11] Walking on one’s land implies ownership,^[12] and the shoe surely acts as a representation of the act of treading on one’s land.^[13] In this scenario, it seems likely that it is the *go’el*’s shoe that is removed as a symbol of the relinquishment of his right to take possession of Elimelekh’s land. Some scholars have suggested that the shoe may also symbolize the right to acquire a woman.^[14] Possibly, the shoe alludes both to the woman and the land, two concepts that are conflated in the usage of the word *go’el*, as we have explained in previous *shiurim*.

Ibn Ezra, in his inimitably practical manner, maintains that the shoe is used in transactions simply because it is a convenient and ever-present item.^[15] This approach may also be the idea underlying an intriguing variant in the Targum on this verse:

This custom was observed in former times in Israel: when they were transacting business or redeeming or exchanging one with another before witnesses [or establishing anything], a man took off his right-hand **glove** and, reaching out with it, the possession [was transferred] to his companion.... So the redeemer said to Boaz, “Stretch out your hand for the symbol of ownership and take possession for yourself.” Boaz drew off his right-hand **glove** and took possession for himself. (Targum, *Ruth* 4:7-8)

The Targum substitutes a glove for the shoe. This suggests that there is no inherent significance in the shoe. Rather, a common item is used to enact the transaction.^[16]

Nevertheless, other circumstances in which shoes are removed in *Tanakh* suggest that its symbolic use may extend beyond a mere commercial transaction. Both Moshe^[17] and Yehoshua^[18] receive a divine command to remove their shoes. In each of these cases, the removal of the shoe appears to be related to divine presence on the land.^[19] Some exegetes suggest that they remove the shoe so that there should be no barrier between their feet and holy ground.^[20] Others suggest that removing one's shoe is symbolic of the removal of all material attachments in preparation for encountering divine revelation.^[21] In these readings, the removal of the shoe seems to be a positive act that has little connection to the scenario in *Megillat Ruth*.^[22] However, the removal of one's shoe can also signify the removal of one's dignity, or even of one's free will.^[23] This would explain why David is barefoot, bareheaded, and weeping as he leaves Jerusalem during Avshalom's rebellion.^[24] It would also account for the fact that the removal of the shoe is a mark of mourning.^[25] This could well be the case with regard to the *chalitza* ceremony, in which the shoe is removed as a symbol of the disgrace of the man who refuses to perform the levirate marriage.^[26]

There is some archeological and biblical evidence that the shoe is used as a legal symbol specifically when the legal transactions do not accord with the spirit of the law.^[27] This is certainly indicated in the situation of the man who refuses to perform the mitzva of *yibbum*. In this case, a shoe is used for the ceremony of *chalitza*, indicating that even though it is legal, it does not conform to the ideal purpose of the law. Renowned Assyriologist Ephraim Avigdor Speiser found evidence in Nuzi documents, which mention shoes as legal symbols. In both cases, shoes are given as a token payment to validate an irregular legal transaction and perhaps also to circumvent legal obstacles.^[28] This usage of the shoe may be supported by the verses in *Amos* (2:6; 8:6), which refer to selling a poor person in exchange for shoes. While it may be legal to sell an impoverished man into slavery, it is not at all a moral act and amounts to the oppression of one's fellow. This may be intimated by employing a shoe during the course of this sale, an act which makes it legal but also confirms how shameless the people have become.

This legal role of the shoe may provide a new context to understand the reference in *Megillat Ruth*. Perhaps a shoe is used in *Ruth* chapter four in acknowledgement of the less than honorable decision of the *go'el* to waive his rights to marry Ruth.^[29] Transference of the rights to Boaz may be valid, but it is certainly not the anticipated or proper legal outcome of the narrative.

Whose Shoe is Removed?

And the *go'el* said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." And he removed his shoe.
(*Ruth* 4:8)

Who is the subject of the verb *va-yishlof*? Does the shoe belong to the *go'el* or to Boaz? Rabbinic sources debate this issue:

Whose shoe? Rav and Levi [disputed]. One said it was Boaz's shoe. The other said that it was the *go'el's* shoe. It seems that the [correct answer is] according to the one who says that it is Boaz's shoe, for it is the way of the purchaser to give a pledge [of his payment]. (*Ruth Rabba* 7:12)^[30]

Let us examine both possibilities. Perhaps the shoe belongs to the erstwhile redeemer, the *go'el*.^[31] The syntax of the sentence, in which the *go'el* is the speaker, leans slightly in favor of this reading. This scenario would suggest that the *go'el* takes off his shoe as a concrete symbol of his relinquishing his rights to the land and/or to marry Ruth. This act also recalls the deed of the man who performs *chalitza*, and whose shoe is removed when he refuses to perform the act of *yibbum*.

Even if the narrative is referring to the *go'el's* shoe, the text leaves open the possibility that Boaz removed it from the *go'el's* foot.^[32] This would create an even more compelling parallel to the *chalitza* ceremony, in which the *yavam's* shoe is removed by the widow.^[33] Finally, if the subject of this action is, in fact, the *go'el*, the fact that his identity is left ambiguous prepares us for his imminent disappearance from the narrative. Indeed, following his official refusal to perform his obligatory *geula*, the *go'el* departs the story and is never mentioned again.

The second possibility is that this shoe belongs to Boaz. This is the conclusion of the above midrash (along with all rabbinic sources).^[34] They conclude that this is a legal transaction of purchase using a proxy item, known as *kinyan chalipin*.^[35] In this type of transaction, it is always the buyer who gives the seller an item so as to assume ownership.^[36]

The ambiguity with regard to the shoe's owner is embedded so deeply within the narrative that it would seem to be its very point. The midrash cited above brings several other examples of narratives which contain ambiguities. Like our shoe, the first two cases in the midrash revolve around the question of the owner of a given article of clothing.^[37]

And similar to this [is the verse] (*I Melakhim* 11), "And Achiya grasped the new garment that [was upon him, and he tore it into twelve pieces]." The garment of whom? Rav and Levi [disputed]. One said: The garment of Yerovam. The other said: The garment of Achiya. R. Shemuel bar R. Nachman said: The one who says that it is Achiya's garment is logical, because it is the way of righteous people to rip [their clothes] when there is divisiveness with regard to Davidic kingship. And similar to this [is the verse] (*I Shemuel* 15), "And Shemuel turned to go and he grabbed hold of the edge of his cloak and he tore [it]." The cloak of whom?^[38] Rav and Levi [disputed]. One said: The cloak of Shaul. The other said: The cloak of Shemuel. The one who says that it is Shemuel's garment is logical, because it is the way of righteous people to rip [their clothes] when their plantings are not praiseworthy. (*Ruth Rabba* 7:11)

Why does the midrash regard these two narratives as analogous to ours? More to the point, what do the narratives of Boaz's shoe, Achiya's garment, and Shemuel's cloak have in common? In each of these cases, a garment is used symbolically. While the conclusion of the midrash is that the shoe's role is to signify a transaction, the other two cases use garments to symbolize a division of national significance relating to kingship. In a momentous (and calamitous) interaction between Achiya and Yeravam, the Davidic kingdom is divided. In the case of Shemuel and Shaul, the clothing is used to symbolize the tearing of the kingship away from Shaul. In drawing this three-way comparison, perhaps the midrash means to hint at a similar meaning in our narrative as well. The episode in which Boaz draws off his shoe and gives it to the *go'e* symbolizes an event of national significance. It is the moment when the *go'e* loses his rights to be part of the dynasty of kingship, and Boaz acquires that right.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that in both of these latter cases, the conclusion is that it is the righteous party whose garment is used. It is possible that the midrash is commenting on the alacrity of the righteous party, whose attention and concern are indicated by his active symbolic deed. Although the midrash does not call Boaz righteous, the conclusion of the midrash is that it was Boaz's shoe which was used. It is possible to extrapolate that the midrash intends to imply that Boaz is the righteous party. In his eagerness and compassion, Boaz takes charge of the situation, speedily removing his own shoe in order to advance the events towards its felicitous end.

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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^[1] See e.g. John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (1967), pp. 399, 421; Yaakov Klein, "Megillat Ruth," *Olam Ha-Tanakh* (1987) p. 100; Yair Zakovich, *Ruth (Mikra Le-Yisrael)*, 1990), p.107; Kirsten Nielson, *Ruth* (1997), p. 89. Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (1988) appears to disagree with this position on p. 248, even though he employs it as evidence on p. 23.

^[2] See *Ruth Rabba* 7:11; Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 4:7; Malbim, *Ruth* 4:7. The Malbim offers an explanation for the abandonment of this custom. I prefer to regard the neglect of an ancient custom as an indication of the deterioration that occurs during the period of *Megillat Ruth*.

^[3] E.g. *Tehillim* 102:26; *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 9:20.

^[4] See *Shofetim* 3:2; *Iyov* 42:11.

^[5] We can draw a similar conclusion from the verse at the conclusion of the book of *Shofetim*, in which the Benjamites are given directions to reach the *Mishkan* in Shilo. This sort of detail reminds the reader that the Benjamites do not frequent Shilo. Because their portion is so close to Shilo (some even have suggested that Shilo belongs to the tribe of Benjamin), they would be more likely than other tribes to visit the *Mishkan*. One could conclude that very few people in the nation actually know how to get to Shilo.

^[6] I believe that we can find some midrashic support for this reading in *Ruth Rabba* 7:11: "R. Chananya bar Papa explained this verse with respect to Israel. Formerly, the [nation] was observing *geula*, as it

says, 'This is my God and I shall praise Him!' (*Shemot* 15). Now they are observing *temura* (exchange), as it says, 'And they exchanged their Glory for the image of an ox which eats grass' (*Tehillim* 106:20)." This comment adduces the rapid religious deterioration of the nation after the Exodus to explain the forgotten custom. This lends support to my reading, suggesting that the religious deterioration after the Exodus parallels the rapid religious deterioration after the period of conquest.

^[7] I previously suggested that this verse may be intended to assert (emphatically) that the formal ceremony is *not* a *chalitza* ceremony, despite the removal of the shoe. See *shiur* #31.

^[8] The actual root of the common word for prophet, *navi*, remains a matter of dispute. In any case, the emphasis may be on the shortage of sight among prophets at this time.

^[9] We have spoken at some length about the social responsibilities implied by the concept of *geula* and its significance and prominent role in the *Megilla*.

^[10] This is a rare word in *Tanakh*. It appears only six times in this form and generally refers to some sort of transaction involving exchange. This transaction may be in the ritual realm (*Vayikra* 27:10, 33) or in the commercial domain (*Iyov* 20:18; 28:17). Another meaning may be found in *Iyov* 15:31, which seems to imply recompense (in exchange for one's evil deeds). In *Megillat Ruth*, the word *temura* may indicate the transfer of rights from one redeemer to the other. Rabbinic sources regard this as a particular kind of transaction in which an item is acquired by using another item as a proxy form of payment (*Bava Metzia* 47a-b [also 11b]). Nevertheless, I have not found a satisfactory literary reason for this reference to *temura* in *Megillat Ruth*. Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (1988), p. 249, suggests simply that this word forms a merismus with the word *geula*, in order to convey that all transactions are included.

^[11] See *Tehillim* 60:10; 108:10. See also the Chizkuni's explanation of *Devarim* 25:9.

^[12] See *Bereishit* 13:17; *Yehoshua* 1:3. *Ruth Rabba* 7:11 discusses whether one actually acquires land by walking on it. See also *Bava Batra* 100a; *Bereishit Rabba* 41:10.

^[13] Nuzi documents have an idiom which validates real estate transactions. A man was said to "lift up his foot from his property," and "place the foot of the other man on it." See Ernest R. Lacheman, "Note on *Ruth* 4, 7-8," *JBL* 56 (1937), pp. 53-56.

^[14] Calum M. Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux: Removing a Man's Sandal as a Female Gesture of Contempt," *JBL* 96 (1977), p. 323, cites T. M. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1969), pp. 449-50, who notes that in Arabic, a wife is sometimes figuratively referred to as a shoe. Aside from the parallel passage with regard to *chalitza*, there is no evidence of this meaning in *Tanakh*. Learning that the shoe symbolizes a woman from these two narratives would result in a circular argument, because these two narratives are clearly referencing each other in so many ways. Therefore, this theory is, in my opinion, unconvincing.

^[15] See also *Bava Metzia* 47a, where there is a discussion regarding which items may be used in this type of transaction. This discussion likewise precludes assigning special meaning to the shoe.

^[16] This seems to be related to the kind of purchase done by proxy, known as *kinyan chalipin* or *kinyan sudar*. See below.

^[17] *Shemot* 3:5.

^[18] *Yehoshua* 5:15.

^[19] This idea was instituted in practice with respect to the *halakhot* of wearing shoes in the Temple. See e.g. *Mishna Berakhot* 9:5 and *Shemot Rabba* 2:13.

^[20] E.g. Ralbag, *Yehoshua* 5:13.

^[21] See Abravanel, *Shemot* 3:4. In this vein, it is instructive to note that the shoe sometimes appears to be a symbol of wealth (*Shir Ha-shirim* 7:2). It appears that common folk were unable to afford shoes in certain biblical periods.

^[22] Nevertheless, the Netziv draws an explicit parallel between Moshe's removal of his shoe (which he maintains is about the removal of materialism) and the ceremony of removing the shoe of the *choletz*. See Netziv, *Shemot* 3:5; *Devarim* 25:9.

^[23] See Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (1988), p. 251.

^[24] *Il Shemuel* 15:30.

^[25] *Yeshayahu* 20:2-4; *Yechezkel* 24:15-24.

^[26] This point is confirmed by the derogatory name given to the *choletz*: "The house of the one whose shoe was removed." See also Calum M. Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux: Removing a Man's Sandal as a Female Gesture of Contempt," *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 321-36.

^[27] See E. A. Speiser's seminal article, "Of Shoes and Shekels," *BASOR* 77 (1940), pp. 15-20. As further evidence of this theory, Speiser accepts the Greek version of Shemuel's farewell speech in *I Shemuel* 12:3. The Greek version (supported also by *Ben Sira* 46:19) reads: "Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Who have I oppressed and who have I abused? From whom have I taken a bribe and a pair of shoes?" This reading is intriguing inasmuch as Shemuel is declaring that he never engaged in any questionable legal activities.

^[28] "Of Shoes and Shekels," *BASOR* 77 (1940), p. 17. Nevertheless, Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (1996), p. 235, has expressed skepticism with regard to the possibility of extrapolating conclusion based upon the Nuzi texts, noting that these texts are notoriously difficult to interpret.

^[29] T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* (1969), pp. 449-50, expresses doubts about this connection, maintaining that in *Megillat Ruth* the emphasis is on the *removal* of the shoe, which is unlike the Nuzi documents.

^[30] See also *Bava Metzia* 47a.

^[31] This is the reading in the Lucianic witnesses of the Greek translation of the book, which contains an additional phrase in the verse, "And he took off his shoe *and gave it to Boaz*." Likewise, the Vulgate has the *go'el* command Boaz to pick up the shoe (which the *go'el* presumably has removed).

^[32] This is less likely because the suffix of the word *na'alo* (*his sandal*) seems to refer to the subject of the preceding verb *va-yishlof* (and he removed), implying that the one who removes the sandal is also the owner of the sandal.

^[33] *Devarim* 25:9.

^[34] See also *Bava Metzia* 47a.

^[35] The *gemara* in *Bava Metzia* 47a regards this scenario as a classic case of *kinyan chalipin* (also referred to as a *kinyan sudar*, referring to the apron or handkerchief often used in the transaction). (Readers will most likely be familiar with this form of transaction from selling *chametz*.) See Rambam, *Hilkhot Mekhira* 5:5; Rashi, *Ruth* 4:7. Rasag (*Ruth* 4:7) states that this is the first instance of this type of transaction and that Boaz instituted it.

^[36] This is evident in the Targum's reading of *Ruth* 4:8: "So the redeemer said to Boaz, 'Stretch out your hand for the symbol of ownership and take possession for yourself.' Boaz drew off his right-hand glove and took possession for himself."

^[37] There is a third example brought in the midrash, but it does not seem connected to the other narratives. It does not involve any article of clothing and the verse cited does not appear to contain a compelling textual ambiguity. For the above reasons, I will not examine this last part of the midrash in my discussion of ambiguous verses.

^[38] The midrash does not address the additional ambiguity in this verse: Who is the subject of the verb "and he tore"? A second ambiguity is present in our verse as well. It is unclear whose shoe is removed and it is additionally unclear who performs the act of removing the shoe.