

MEGILLAT RUTH
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Shiur #34: A Blessing on Both Your Houses: Rachel and Leah

Houses

And the nation in the gate and the elders as witnesses said, “God shall place this woman who is coming into your **house** as Rachel and as Leah, who built, the two of them, the **house** of Israel, and do valor in Ephraim and call a name in *Beit Lechem* (‘The **House** of Bread’). And your **house** shall be like the **house** of Perez, who Tamar birthed for Yehuda, from the seed that God shall give you from this young woman.” (*Ruth* 4:11-12)

Megillat Ruth begins with a man who goes to Moav, abandoning his hometown of Beit Lechem – and along with his literal house, he also abandons his tribal house of Yehuda and his national house of Israel.^[1] As the narrative progresses, it seems that the house of Elimelech (literal and metaphoric) has faded and is no longer in existence. Naomi’s attempt to convince her daughters-in-law that their only hope for a family is to return to Moav includes a bid to direct them to find repose, each in the *house* of a husband (*Ruth* 1:9).^[2] It would appear that Naomi thinks that there is no possibility for the construction of a house for her daughters-in-law if they insist on accompanying her to Bethlehem.

Throughout the course of the narrative, there is not a single reference to a physical structure in which Naomi and Ruth live.^[3] The setting of their conversations is deliberately vague. This is especially striking when Ruth returns to Naomi after her day in the fields of Bethlehem. The text informs us that, “She arrived *at the city*, and she showed her mother-in-law that which she had gleaned” (*Ruth* 2:18). A similar elusiveness is apparent when Ruth returns from her night in Boaz’s threshing-floor: “And she came to her mother-in-law” (*Ruth* 3:16). The general description of Ruth’s arrival “at the city” and “to her mother-in-law” obscures any image of Ruth or Naomi in a house.^[4] This may be a deliberate bid to present Naomi’s and Ruth’s lack of stability, as is evidenced by the absence of a stable structure in the story.

The expected outcome of the story is that Ruth will not merit the construction of a house for herself or for her deceased husband. Indeed, the *go’el* declines to marry Ruth. In this act of refusal, he evokes the *choletz*, who renounces the opportunity to build his brother’s house. In the words of the wife of the deceased as she removes his shoe, “So shall be done to the man who refuses to build the *house* of his brother” (*Devarim* 25:9). For this reason, the man who refuses to perform the obligatory *yibbum* forever bears the name, “The *House* of the One who Removed his Shoe” (*Devarim* 25:10). The man who refuses to build a house for his brother has his house renamed to reflect his shameful demurral.

Nevertheless, Boaz, the worthier *go'el*, remedies this precarious situation at the close of the *Megilla*. The blessing of the witnesses features the construction of the house of Boaz and Ruth. This house seems to be both a literal and a figurative one. On the one hand, it is first described as the house which Ruth is hereby entering (*Ruth* 4:11). This would appear to connote an actual structure. At the same time, however, Ruth and Boaz's house is modeled upon the house of Israel and the house of Yehuda, thereby indicating that it is much more than a physical edifice. Ruth and Boaz construct a house which will function as a crucial link to the house of Peretz (the dynasty of the kingship) and will also be instrumental in rebuilding the house of Israel. The fivefold mention of this house is therefore a fitting and reparative end to this book.

The erection of the house should be read within a broader context as well. In the period of the *Shofetim*, the national house is threatened with collapse.^[5] The book of *Shofetim* weaves together a remarkable tapestry in which the collapse of the physical structure, the collapse of the house of specific families and dynasties, and the collapse of Israel itself mingle and intertwine to form a cohesive narrative of social collapse.

Let us begin with the threat which looms over a physical house. Yiftach's house is the first one threatened with literal destruction. The people of Ephraim are outraged that he has not included them in his military endeavors and they warn him menacingly (*Shofetim* 12:1), "We will burn your house upon you in flames!" A similar threat is delivered by the Philistines to Shimshon's first wife in a bid to compel her to reveal the solution to Shimshon's riddle (*Shofetim* 14:15): "Tell us the riddle, lest we will burn you and your father's house^[6] in fire!" Later in the story, Shimshon literally brings down a house, fracturing the supporting pillars and collapsing the roof upon the revelers (*Shofetim* 16:29-30).

The house is no longer a safe haven, and it is beginning to wobble, as a symbol of the teetering societal stability. This becomes painfully clear in the final, horrific narrative of the rape of the concubine in Giv'eah. The narrative illustrates the manner in which the townspeople of Giv'eah do not welcome guests or offer anyone refuge in their houses (*Shofetim* 19:15, 18). After one elderly man does shelter travelers in his house, the men of Giv'eah surround the house and demand that the host relinquish "the man who has come into your *house*" (*Shofetim* 19:22) so that they can rape him. The house has been rendered ineffective in its primary role as an asylum and shelter from violence. This is indicated by the tenfold reference to the house of the host which is violated by the men of the city. The story concludes with the return of the guest (and his violated concubine) to his own house. There, the outraged husband does further violence to the woman (in his house) when he dismembers her body and sends pieces of it to all of the borders of Israel (*Shofetim* 19:29).

Figurative houses, which are family groups, are threatened as well throughout the book of *Shofetim*. Avimelekh comes to his father's house^[7] and kills all of his brothers, nearly obliterating the dynasty of his father (*Shofetim* 9:5). Yiftach is expelled from his father's house and told that he has no inheritance there (*Shofetim* 11:2, 7). The

tribe of Dan threatens Mikha with destruction of his own life and the lives of those who belong to his father's house (*Shofetim* 18:25).

It should not surprise us that the book of *Shofetim* ends with the near dissolution of the house of Israel in the form of a civil war. In their declaration of civil war, the tribes recoil in horror from the terrible tale of the man who had experienced the "hospitality" of the townspeople of Give'ah. Their response includes a pledge that, "No man among us shall return to his house!" On a basic level, this alludes to each man's physical home. However, this may also be understood as a metaphor; they cannot return to the house of Israel. Indeed, until this evil is uprooted, there is simply no national house to which they can return, for the house no longer functions in a suitable fashion.

This theme is especially highlighted when we consider the role of women in relation to the house in *Shofetim*. On two separate occasions, the destruction of the house is precipitated by the woman's departure from the house. The first episode involves a voluntary exit. Yiftach's daughter leaves her house to greet her father in celebration. Despite the fanfare, her exit from the house portends her death,^[8] her father's tragedy, and the metaphoric collapse of his house.^[9] This story anticipates and ominously foreshadows the final narrative in the book, that of the rape of the concubine in Give'ah. There, a woman does not voluntarily leave a house, but is actually forcibly expelled from the house, thereby precipitating its downfall. The house of Israel is no longer a stable entity; it is precipitously wobbling on the verge of self-destruction.

The rectification of this situation begins with bringing a woman back into a house.^[10] Rabbinic sources appear to note this as well:

"God shall place this woman [who is coming into your **house** (*Ruth* 4:11)]." R. Aha said: Anyone who marries a worthy woman it is as though he has upheld the entire Torah from the beginning until the end... Therefore, "*Eshet Chayil*" is written from *aleph* until *tav*. And generations will not be redeemed except because of the reward of the righteous women in the generation. (*Ruth Zuta* 4:11; *Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth* 606)

This echoes the well-known midrash which credits the women in Egypt with meriting and obtaining redemption.^[11] The list of women who help bring about Israel's redemption from Egypt is lengthy: the midwives Shifra and Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, the daughter of Pharaoh, and Tziphora. Although each son of Yaakov initially goes down to Egypt with his entire house (*ish u-veito ba'u*), were it not for the women, the house of Israel could well collapse. Intriguingly, the midwives who first defy Pharaoh's decree of death are rewarded when God makes for them *houses* (*Shemot* 1:21)!^[12] The story of the Exodus draws to its felicitous conclusion in *Shemot* 12, a chapter whose legal sections and narrative surrounds the focal center, which is the house. The house is mentioned sixteen times in *Shemot* 12, which constructs the emerging nation of Israel around this core, the house.

The midrash asserts that the redemption during the period of the Judges begins with Ruth, a displaced woman who finally enters a home. This act presages the reinforcement of the wobbling house of Israel and ultimately produces a son who founds the house of David.

Rachel and Leah, Who Built the House of Israel Together

The blessing of the witnesses links Ruth to Jewish history. No longer is Ruth an outsider whose intrusion into Bethlehem society is a source of consternation and alarm, but rather a woman identified with some of the most illustrious female personages in the *Tanakh*. In this blessing, Ruth obtains full-fledged membership in Israel.

We have previously discussed the connection between the narrative of Ruth (and Naomi) and the story of Tamar. The courage and fortitude of women and their willingness to pay a price for children are often the factor which determines the continued destiny of their line. Why, however, does this blessing create a parallel between Ruth and the matriarchs Rachel and Leah?

A considerable amount of attention has been given to the placement of Rachel before Leah. Some commentators note that she is given precedence because she was the favored wife and the one in charge of the household.^[13] Others note that Rachel is associated with Bethlehem and Efrata, where she was buried.^[14] Nevertheless, it is Leah who is actually the one whose children receive an inheritance in Bethlehem and Efrata. More significantly, Leah, the mother of Yehuda, is actually the matriarch of the Davidic dynasty.^[15] This has caused some scholars to speculate that the second position mentioned is actually the more important one.^[16]

I am more interested in why both of these Matriarchs are part of Ruth's blessing at all. Perhaps it is Leah's struggle for marriage and Rachel's struggle for children that accounts for their presence in this blessing. Just as their efforts were ultimately successful, so Ruth is blessed with a similarly felicitous end. The Targum on this verse suggests that the focus of the blessing is the twelve children who emerge from Rachel and Leah (along with their maidservants). By comparing Ruth to these women, the union of Ruth and Boaz is blessed with fertility. Malbim (*Ruth* 4:11) is interested in the fact that, like Ruth, Rachel and Leah came from a disreputable background.^[17] Despite having been raised in Lavan's house, they built a worthy house for themselves and their families. Ruth, whose questionable national identity lurks in the background of this narrative, receives a blessing that, like the illustrious matriarchs, she shall merit a commendable dynasty. Finally, there may be an analogy between Rachel and Leah's roles as matriarchs of the Jewish nation and Ruth's impending role as the matriarch of Kingship. All of them are progenitors of the house of David.

In addition to the variety of approaches cited above, it seems to me that the key to this component of the blessing is the fact that Rachel and Leah are joined together. The word "*shetei*hem," "the two of them," emphasizes the linking of these two women who struggled so bitterly during their lifetime. Their personal rivalry sets into motion the

key rift within the nation, that of the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel. This historical clash is expressed in many conflicts over the course of biblical history. Consider, for example, the antagonism between Joseph (son of Rachel) and his brothers (of whom Yehuda, son of Leah, functions as leader) and between Saul (of the house of Rachel) and David (of the house of Leah).

This moment in biblical history represents a historic opportunity for union. David, who emerges from the union of Ruth and Boaz, has the unique ability to rise above the tribal factions and unify the people. Indeed, despite the clash between Saul and David and despite the prophetic promise that David will receive kingship (*I Shemuel* 16:12-13), David continually resists using violence against Saul. David searches for unity instead of warfare, as is evident in his willingness to make peace with Avner (*II Shemuel* 3). David moves his capital from the heartlands of Judean territory (Chevron) to the border between Yehuda and Binyamin (Jerusalem) (*II Shemuel* 5). This move is a precarious one for David, who is no longer ruling from within the geographical territory of his tribe. Nevertheless, this move issues a categorical statement with regard to David's intentions: David does not intend to impose his will over Binyamin as an outsider. Rather, he aspires to link Yehuda and Binyamin together and rule as a beloved king over all of Israel. His initial success may be evident in the words of all of the tribes when he is anointed as king over the entire nation:

And all of the tribes of Israel came to David in Chevron and they said, "We are your flesh and bones..." (*II Shemuel* 5:1)

Radak's comment highlights the mood of unity among the people, implied by their statement indicating their familial connection to David:

"We are your flesh and bones." Even though you are from the family of Yehuda, we are also close to you, for we are also the sons of Israel, brothers, all of us. (Radak, *II Shemuel* 5:1)

David may have partially achieved the vision of unity in his lifetime. However, two generations later, the nation is once again ripped asunder and divides into two kingdoms. Indeed, the kingdom splits along the fault-line of this historical strife, when Yerovam ben Navat, of the house of Rachel, establishes an Israelite dynasty which is distinct from the Davidic dynasty of the house of Leah (*I Melakhim* 11-12). This division is catastrophic for the Israelite nation and results in the eventual exile and attendant disaster. Messianic hope for unity continues to rest on the dynasty created by Ruth and Boaz. In some ideal future, a seed will emerge from the house of Yishai (*Yeshayahu* 11:1) and establish one kingdom. The unity of that kingdom will be certain when the children of Rachel and the children of Leah will cease their hostilities and unite under the banner of the Davidic dynasty:

And the envy of Ephraim will be removed and the troublers of Yehuda will be destroyed. Ephraim will no longer be envious of Yehuda and Yehuda will no longer trouble Ephraim. (*Yeshayahu* 11:13)

A similar vision appears in God's words to Yechezkel:

"Take for yourself one stick and write on it, 'For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.' Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand... and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms...My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. (*Yechezkel* 37:16-24)

The story of Ruth contains within it the potential to mend the rift of Rachel and Leah. These women can properly construct the ideal house of Israel only when they are brought together by the scion of the union of Boaz and Ruth.

Bethlehem (and Efrata) is the place which symbolizes this merger of the two houses. After all, it is both part of the inheritance of the children of Leah and also associated with Rachel's burial. It is unsurprising, therefore, that kingship, which is conceived in order to draw these factions together, emerges from this place of unification.

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] The word *bayit* can designate both the physical dwelling (e.g. *Bereishit* 19; *Yehoshua* 2:6-8) and a group of familial relationships, whether it be immediate family (e.g. *Devarim* 25:9) or the extended clan/tribe (e.g. *II Shemuel* 3:6). The term often designates the descendants of a person and the development of a dynasty (see e.g. *I Shemuel* 2:35; *II Shemuel* 7:11-16; *I Melakhim* 11:38). A broad use of this term is "the house of Israel," which of course binds the entire nation together in one familial grouping. See e.g. *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (1957), p. 116.

^[2] Naomi first sends them to their mother's *house* (*Ruth* 1:8), which presumably means a place to find marriage (see e.g. *Bereishit* 24:28; *Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:4).

^[3] The one phrase which refers to some sort of house to which Ruth has returned (*Ruth* 2:7) is unclear. It is possible that the phrase, "*zeh shivtah ha-bayit me'at*" ("she only sat in the house for a little bit") (*Ruth* 2:7) should be understood as Ruth's sojourn in **Beit** Lechem (see *shiur* #14 for a different understanding of this phrase). Even if we read the phrase in a manner that

situates Ruth in a house, it seems significant that Ruth's residing in "the house" is modified by the word *me'at*, which limits Ruth's repose in that house.

[4] It is possible that we should not expect to find this detail in the narrative. As we know, the *Tanakh* often records events in a laconic style, noting only those points which are directly relevant. Nevertheless, the larger theme of the house during the period of the *Shofetim* does appear to be significant, and therefore I have presented the absence of the physical house of Naomi and Ruth as a meaningful, and perhaps deliberate, omission.

[5] I will now expand upon a theme which I previously developed at some length in *shiur* #23 in discussing the parallel between Boaz and Shimshon.

[6] The argument could certainly be advanced in this story that the threatened destruction is not upon the physical house, but upon the family of her father. Needless to say, this threat recalls the story of Yiftach and the tribe of Ephraim.

[7] It is unclear whether this alludes to a physical structure, or, more likely, to his clan.

[8] There is some measure of controversy as to whether her father fulfilled his vow in a literal manner and had her killed (see e.g. Ralbag and Radak on *Shofetim* 11:39). The simple meaning of the narrative suggests that she was indeed put to death (see also *Tanhuma Behukotai*, *Taanit* 4a; Ramban, *Vayikra* 27:29).

[9] Note the wordplay between the word "*beito*" (referring to Yitach's house) and "*bito*" (referring to Yiftach's daughter) in *Shofetim* 11:34. This wordplay suggests how deeply intertwined Yiftach's house is with his only child. There is no continuity of the house without progeny.

[10] While here I am focused on Ruth's role as the *tikkun*, I cannot neglect to mention that Chana functions in a similar manner in the book of *Shemuel*. There, the word "*bayit*" also highlights Chana's *tikkun* of the period of the Judges.

[11] *Shemot Rabba* 1:12-13. See also *Tanchuma*, *Pekudei* 9.

[12] While there is a fair measure of controversy as to who received these houses (see Ramban ad loc.) and what they actually were (see e.g. Rashi, Shadal ad loc.), and whether they should be considered a reward at all (see e.g. Rashbam, R. Yitzchak Arama, and Malbim ad loc.), the simple meaning of the verse is that the houses were given to the midwives as rewards. For our purposes, the precise identification of these houses is unimportant.

[13] *Tanchuma*, *Vayeitze* 15; *Ruth Rabba* 7:13; *Ruth Zuta* 4:13; Rashi and Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 4:11.

[14] See Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* (Anchor Bible, 1975), p. 152.

[15] The midrash notes this as well; see *Ruth Rabba* 7:13 and see *Torah Temima* loc cit.

[16] Jack Sassoon, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (1979), p. 154. Note that Ruth herself is named in the second position when she and Orpah are introduced in *Ruth* 1:4.

[17] *Ruth Rabba* 8:1 suggests that the witnesses use this example because of the problem of Boaz marrying a Moavite. Marriage to two sisters is likewise prohibited (*Vayikra* 18:18), and yet the union between Yaakov and the sisters is accepted and produces the foundations of Israel. Similarly, Ruth and Boaz's union is being blessed with validity despite the fact that Ruth is a Moavite.