

Redemption in Megillat Ruth

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by

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The main problem we face in Megillat Ruth is how to place it within the context of Tanakh, in order that it not remain an episode standing on its own. Several verses in the Megilla hint at the connection, especially at the end when we read about the link between Ruth and King David. This, according to several Rishonim, is the actual reason that we read this Megilla on Shavu'ot, since on this day King David was born and died.

It is clear, however, that there is room to expand on the connection between King David and the Megilla. In the last two chapters of Ruth, the word "ge'ula" (redemption) repeats itself quite a few times. "For you are a redeeming kinsman ... I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another redeemer closer than I ... if he will act as a redeemer, good! Let him redeem. But if he does not want to act as redeemer for you, I will do so myself," and many other times. The word ge'ula hints at a connection to King David, as we will explain.

Perhaps the connection exists not only at the end of the Megilla but also at the beginning, where we are told of the punishment of Elimelekh and his family. Although Elimelekh's sin is not explicitly recounted, his punishment is clear - he dies, and his sons die without bearing children. His wife is old and cannot have any more children. In other words, the family is cut off from the land of the living. All we know about Elimelekh is that he left his country during a famine; if we view this act in a historical context, we can gain insight into the reason he was punished.

While Elimelekh and Naomi connect us to the family of Yehuda, the royal tribe of Israel, Ruth links us to the family of Moav, descended from Lot. Lot's story is similar to that of Elimelekh - during years of famine, when there was not enough food for Lot's and Avraham's livestock together, Lot left the land and traveled to Sodom, which was apparently located east of the Jordan River. If this be the case, he traveled out of Israel. The location of Sodom is not fully known, but the city of Tzo'ar, one of Sodom's neighboring cities where Lot lived after the upheaval, appears in Yirmiyahu (48:34) in a prophecy on

Moav. According to this interpretation, Lot left Avraham's house for a land that became known as part of Moav. Lot's departure constituted not only a geographic exit from Israel but also a cultural and religious exit, from the Godly nation of Avraham to a foreign nation, from Avraham's way of life (which followed the path of God, a way of charity and justice) to its opposite, the Sodomite way. According to Chazal, Lot declared: "I do not want Avraham and his God."

Elimelekh repeats the same act, and there is no doubt that it has the same significance; as Chazal say, "One who lives outside of Israel is like one who has no God." Elimelekh's sons marry non-Jewish women (according to Rashi and Chazal but not according to Ibn Ezra). He becomes immersed in foreign culture, and, essentially, he leaves Avraham and his God, attaching himself to the culture of Moav. For this reason, his punishment is also so great.

Lot in his time was punished in a similar manner - his wife dies, his sons-in-law and married daughters are destroyed, and he remains an old man with daughters who cannot marry. Elimelekh, too, leaves behind a wife who cannot bear children, and two daughters-in-law whom no man in Israel will come forward to redeem.

We have already pointed out that in Megillat Ruth there is a meeting between the House of Yehuda and the family of Lot. We find a similar sin with a similar punishment with regard to Yehuda. Although Yehuda did not leave the country and did not abandon his father's culture, he did force this fate onto his brother Yosef, causing him to leave his father's home and culture with the intent that he should become defiled by the culture of a foreign nation. The punishment exacted of Yehuda is similar to that which befalls both Lot and Elimelekh. Immediately after selling Yosef, Yehuda marries; his wife later dies, his two sons die, and in his opinion, his third son cannot perform the act of yibbum (levirate marriage) with his daughter-in-law. He is left without any assured continuity.

The tie that binds these cases is that in all three stories there is almost a total loss of family, but at the last minute a solution is found through the act of yibbum. With regard to Yehuda, the yibbum is mentioned expressly in the text. With regard to Lot, the matter is hinted at. Professor Benno Jacob points out a linguistic anomaly in the statement of Lot's daughters: "And there is not a man on earth to consort with us" (Bereishit 19:31). In Hebrew, the word "aleinu" is unusual; usually the word "eleinu" would be used in this context. The only other time that "aleinu" appears in a similar context is in the chapter on yibbum: "Yevamah yavo aleiha - Her husband's brother shall unite with her" (Devarim 25:5). In other words, this hints that yibbum was at the heart of Lot's daughters' attempts to revive their father's seed and rebuild the name of the family that perished.

In the third case, that of Boaz and Ruth, there is no expression relating to yibbum, but the text does state, "So as to perpetuate the name of the deceased on his estate" (Ruth 4:5), similar to what is written in the parasha on yibbum, "... shall be accounted to his dead brother, that his name not be blotted out in Israel" (Devarim 25:6). Yibbum in all three cases is the solution to the problem, but in all

three cases, the yibbum is irregular. We do not find here a standard case of yibbum between the brother of the deceased and the widow; rather, we have a father (Lot) with his daughter, a father (Yehuda) with his daughter-in-law, and the father's brother (Boaz) with the father's daughter-in-law. These irregular, surprising acts of yibbum are what return the families to the land of the living.

But there is an additional point to note here - the return of the lost person to his property. Sodom, a land of wickedness, was given to Moav as an inheritance: "I have assigned it as a possession to the descendants of Lot" (Devarim 2:19).

In the case of Yehuda, Yosef is the lost son who returns to his family, and the place from which he was dispossessed of his inheritance - Dotan Valley - is given later as an inheritance to his descendants, the daughters of Tzelofchad. There they resurrect their dead father's name, and there they also resurrect the name of Yosef, who had been exiled by brothers.

The most prominent case of return to lost property appears in our Megilla, where the acquisition of Ruth overlaps with the purchase of the field. "When you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moavite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased" (Ruth 4:5). Redemption thus occurs when the name of the deceased is resurrected on his property. Parallel to this, in Parashat Behar we find the term redemption used with regard to the return of the freed slave to his property and the return of family estates in the Jubilee year.

When a slave, who sold himself to a foreigner and went out from amongst his nation, is returned to his property, that is called redemption. The prophet Yechezkel (chap. 36) describes the redemption of the nation of Israel in a similar manner. First, the nation will return to the land of its inheritance. Immediately afterwards, God purifies Israel: "I will sprinkle pure water on you and you will be pure" (36:25). Here, the parallel to the red heifer is clear (and therefore these verses are known to us from the haftara of Parashat Para) - purification from the impurity caused by contact with the dead. After these verses comes the chapter on the dry bones, "I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live" (37:5). Thus, the redemption nation of Israel begins as the redemption of the land, and on the redeemed land the dry bones arise and live.

The land, the inheritance, gives man his connection to eternity. The days of the land are "like the days of the world" (as Rashi explains in Parashat Ha'azinu), and even though man's days are limited, his connection to the land gives him eternal life. When a person is rooted in his property and passes it to his son and grandson, only then does he taste immortality. Cain's punishment for the murder is that "You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth" (Bereishit 4:12). In parallel, when the nation of Israel is punished with exile, when it is evicted from the land of the living, it turns temporarily into a "dead" nation until the redemption of the bones, the resurrection of the dead on his property.

The same rooting in the land is described by the verse: "For the days of My people shall be as long as the days of a tree" (Yeshayahu 65:22). The tree embodies eternal existence, as described in Iyov (14:7-9): "There is hope for a tree; if it is cut down it will renew itself ... at the scent of water it will bud." Even after the tree has dried out, it can still revive itself through its attachment to the land. But the death of man, who is not attached to the land, is an eternal death.

Man's existence depends on passing his property to his sons or to those who come in their place due to yibbum. We have mentioned three stories: the first (Lot) is the story of the birth of Moav. The second is the story of the birth of the House of Yehuda. The third is the story of the meeting between the two - between Ruth (Moav) and Boaz (Yehuda). The theme uniting the three is the resurrection of the name of the dead on his property. This is redemption, and this is the goal of the House of David – to reestablish the People of Israel on its land. When all hope is gone, there is still the possibility of yibbum, even in an irregular, unnatural manner, which allows the name of the deceased to be resurrected on his property.

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