

The Night at the Threshing Floor: Uncovering the Motives of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz

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By Rav Mordechai Sabato

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GO OVER AND UNCOVER HIS FEET

Ruth's marriage to Boaz appears, at first glance, to be the climax of Megillat Ruth. This point marks the union between the two great "gomlei chasadim" (doers of kindness) of the Megilla, Ruth and Boaz. The marriage receives warm blessings from the nation and its elders (4:11-12), and these heartfelt wishes accompany the couple throughout their marriage. Although the ultimate purpose of the marriage – "to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate" – has yet to be achieved, this stage is not solely in man's power, and depends upon the will of God.

This marriage, which took place before "all the people at the [city] gate and the elders," including witnesses, as required by Jewish law, originated from the peculiar, mysterious encounter at the threshing floor. Naomi had initiated the idea that Ruth come to Boaz at the threshing floor, and quite clearly explained her underlying motive: "Daughter, I must seek security for you, where you may be happy" (3:1). This expression clearly alludes to marriage, and refers us back to what Naomi had told her daughters-in-law towards the beginning of the Megilla: "May the Lord grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband" (1:9).

However, the means Naomi employs appear not to correspond at all with this objective. Her initial instructions – "Bathe, anoint yourself, dress up" (3:3) – may indeed refer to preparations for marriage. But her next instruction – "and go down to the threshing floor; do not disclose yourself to the man until

he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down" (3:3-4) – can hardly be seen as marriage. It certainly does not meet the criteria of marriage as defined by Halakha, as the Rambam writes at the beginning of Hilkhhot Ishut (1:1):

"Before the giving of the Torah, a man would meet a woman in the marketplace, and if he and she wished to marry, he would bring her into his home and lie with her in private, and she would thus be his wife. Once the Torah was given, Yisrael were commanded that should a man wish to marry a woman, he must first acquire her in the presence of witnesses and only then she becomes his wife, as it says, 'When a man takes a woman and comes to her.'"

It is hard to imagine that Naomi anticipated Boaz's extraordinary response to Ruth's arrival. To the contrary, the simple reading of Naomi's instructions indicates that she prepared her daughter-in-law for an illicit relationship with Boaz. Naomi assumed (to a large extent, correctly) that in Boaz's condition at that point, after eating and drinking, he would be unable to restrain himself upon discovering a woman lying at his feet in the middle of the night, when there would be nobody around to witness the event.

It seems that the Midrash (Ruth Rabba 6:4), which compares Boaz's situation that night to Yosef's challenge in Potifar's home, viewed this incident from such an angle:

"Rabbi Yossi said: There were three whose evil inclination threatened to overtake them, and each of them responded to it with an oath. They are: Yosef, David and Boaz.

Yosef – as it says, 'How then can I do this most wicked thing... and sin before God?'... He swore to his evil inclination and said, 'By God, I will not sin.'...

Boaz – from where do we know? For it says, 'as the Lord lives – lie down until morning'... Rabbi Yehuda says: That entire night, his evil inclination worked against him, saying, 'You are single and seek a wife; she is single and seeks a husband. Arise and sleep with her, and she will be your wife!' He swore to his evil inclination and said, 'As the Lord lives, I will not touch her.'"

This incident brings to mind as well the story of Lot and his daughters: "Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father" (Bereishit 19:32). Several details, however, reveal a basic distinction between the two narratives. Naomi's etiquette prevented her from describing her objective in explicit terms, and thus mentioned simply, "lie down," omitting the word "imo" ("with him"). Similarly, Naomi does not recommend having Boaz drink, nor does she anticipate his becoming intoxicated to the point of losing awareness of his conduct. In fact, Naomi expects that Boaz will tell Ruth that same night "what you are to do" (3:4).

These differences express the essential distinction between the two incidents, a distinction that reveals the underlying goal of Naomi's plan. Lot's daughters clearly intended merely to bear children from their father, and never had any intention of marrying him. This cannot possibly be Naomi's intention, for how would this provide the "security" that she so sincerely wished for Ruth? Necessarily, then, Naomi figured that an intimate relationship at the threshing floor would lead to marriage. Knowing Boaz as she did – "For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today" (3:18) – Naomi was convinced that Boaz would not allow his encounter with Ruth to remain an illicit relationship. Understanding Ruth's motives and acknowledging his responsibility as a goel (redeeming kinsman), he would marry Ruth.

LET IT NOT BE KNOWN THAT THE WOMAN CAME TO THE THRESHING FLOOR

This approach gives rise to the critical question of whether the Tanakh approves of Naomi's plan. Is it permissible for her to fulfill her noble objective through the most inappropriate of means? May one person trigger another's awareness of his responsibility by arousing his evil inclination?

This question brings to mind a similar question concerning another prominent woman in Tanakh, Rivka, who orders Yaakov to seize deceptively the blessings intended for his brother. Convinced that Yaakov deserved the blessings, by virtue of both his character and the explicit prophecy she had received from God – "the older will serve the younger" (see Targum Onkelos and Rashbam to Bereishit 27:13), Rivka instructs Yaakov to deceive his father and take his brother's blessing. In both instances, the women felt assured of their scheme's success, despite the considerable risk entailed. The Midrash (Ruth Rabba 6:1) indeed draws a comparison between these two incidents:

"A man's trembling becomes a trap for him' (Mishlei 29:25): This refers to the trembling Yaakov caused Yitzchak, as it says, 'Yitzchak was seized with very violent trembling.' He should have cursed him, only 'But he who trusts in the Lord shall be safeguarded' – You placed [an idea] in his heart to bless him, as it says, 'Now he must remain blessed.'

[This verse also refers to] the trembling Ruth caused Boaz, as it says, 'The man trembled and pulled back.' He should have cursed her, only 'But he who trusts in the Lord shall be safeguarded' – You placed [an idea] in his heart that he would bless her, as it says, 'You are blessed to the Lord, my daughter.'"

It is doubtful, however, whether this comparison between Naomi and Rivka could justify what Naomi did. The commentaries have noted that Yaakov's deception was the direct cause of his exile – not only practically, but also on the level of reward and punishment. Many sources have also observed the clear parallel between Lavan's duplicity towards Yaakov, particularly in substituting Rachel with Leah, and Yaakov's seizing of Esav's blessing. The Midrash comments (Bereishit Rabba 70:19):

"Throughout the night, he would call to her, 'Rachel,' and she would respond. In the morning, 'Behold, she was Leah.' He said: You are a trickster, the daughter of a trickster! She said to him: Is there a teacher without students? Did your father not similarly call to you, 'Esav,' and you responded? You, too, called to me and I responded."

This Midrash clearly sees Yaakov's experiences with Lavan as a punishment "measure-for-measure" for deceiving his father. (For further elaboration on this subject, see Nechama Leibowitz's "Studies on Sefer Bereishit.")

In our context, too, the Midrash (Ruth Rabba 7:1) emphasizes the chillul Hashem (desecration of God's Name) that could have resulted from Ruth's visit to the threshing floor:

"Rabbi Chonya and Rabbi Yirmiya said in the name of Rav Shemuel bar Rav Yitzchak: That entire night, Boaz was spread out on the floor crying, 'Master of the worlds! It is revealed and known to You that I did not touch her. May it be Your will that it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor, so that the Name of God not be desecrated through me!'"

"I MUST SEEK SECURITY FOR YOU"

An action taken that could potentially result in a chillul Hashem must be looked upon negatively. But despite the impropriety with which we assess Naomi's scheme, it behooves us to fully understand her motives. Her primary goal is, as mentioned earlier, finding security for Ruth. Naomi has in mind not her own well-being, but rather Ruth's. The question, then, arises, if indeed Naomi thinks only of what is best for Ruth, why does she insist on Ruth's marriage to Boaz, which entails a risky scheme that could potentially cause a chillul Hashem and even damage Ruth's reputation and bring upon her a curse?

One might have suggested that no one in Am Yisrael at that time would be willing to marry a Moavite girl who only recently arrived from Moav, lest he "impair his estate" (see 4:6). This assumption, however, is clearly incorrect, for Boaz tells Ruth, "Your latest act of kindness is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich" (3:10). Even after Ruth's "first act of kindness," her resettlement in Israel with Naomi, she could have "turned to younger men." Boaz perceives her decision not to do so as an act of kindness to Naomi. It stands to reason that both of Ruth's acts of kindness stem from the same underlying reason. The reason behind her first act of kindness is clearly expressed in her own words to Naomi:

"Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my

God. Where you die, I will die, and here I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord to do me if anything but death parts me from you." (1:16-17)

Significantly, the idea of joining Am Yisrael and embracing the Jewish faith is not the primary component of Ruth's declaration. She focuses here instead on her desire to stay with Naomi wherever she goes. The significance of this point has to do with the supreme kindness entailed, her devotion to Naomi that does not yield to any other considerations, including religious factors. Thus, for example, had Naomi decided to join a different nation, Ruth still would have joined her. Ruth's refusal to "turn to younger men" simply continues her first act of kindness and expresses her ongoing devotion to Naomi. Her marriage to a different man would have pulled her to his family and estate, which would necessarily mean her separation from Naomi – something she had promised never to allow to occur.

Naomi knew full well Ruth's considerations. She understood that she could find "security" for her daughter-in-law, a husband acceptable to Ruth, only from within her family, someone who would redeem the family's estate. Such a marriage would not only prevent Ruth's separation from Naomi, but would rebuild Naomi's destroyed family by "perpetuating the name of the deceased upon his estate." The fact that immediately upon their return from Moav, Providence directed Ruth to Boaz's field, served for Naomi as a sign from above, as she says to Ruth, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead... for the man is related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsmen" (2:20). (This sign parallels the prophecy given to Rivka, that her older son would serve the younger, which led her to act as he did, as discussed earlier.) Seeing that several months have passed and Boaz had not acted to fulfill his obligation as redeemer, Naomi decides to rely on the heavenly signal and actively pursue the matter. We must emphasize once again that Naomi is driven primarily by her desire to find stability and security for Ruth, rather than perpetuating her deceased husband's name upon his estate.

I WILL DO EVERYTHING YOU TELL ME

Ruth hears Naomi's plan and responds, "I will do everything you tell me" (3:5). Ruth goes to the threshing floor not to find for herself security, but rather to obey her mother-in-law's command. What did Ruth think of Naomi's scheme? She did not know Boaz as Naomi did. Although Boaz indeed treated her warmly and kindly when they first met, what she now does violates the most basic codes of ethics. Wouldn't he think of her as a conniving manipulator? Wouldn't she bring upon herself a curse, rather than blessing? After all, as the Midrash commented, he rightfully should have cursed her. And who could guarantee that he would marry her? Wouldn't she expect that after his loss of control he would try to dissociate himself from her and his sinful act, leaving her bereft not only of security, but of her self-respect? Wouldn't she be seen as a Moavite girl who brings with her to Israel the norms of Moav? Despite all these concerns, "She did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her" (3:6).

It would seem that beyond her commitment to her mother-in-law's command, Ruth is driven by another consideration, which emerges from a comparison between this narrative and the incident of Yehuda and Tamar. Tamar, too, seduced Yehuda in order to perpetuate the name of the deceased, putting her honor and even her life at risk. But as opposed to Ruth, Tamar knew with certainty that her father-in-law could not marry her, as the Torah states clearly in explaining the reason behind Yehuda's conduct: "He said, 'Here, let me lie with you' – for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law" (Bereishit 38:16). Likewise, after that entire incident, we are told that "he was not intimate with her again" (38:16). Tamar knew from the outset that even if her plan succeeded, she would not marry Yehuda or any other man, and would remain a widow for the rest of her life. She nevertheless was prepared to pay this price in order to perpetuate the name of the deceased.

In Ruth's case, marriage was certainly a possibility and in fact was the center of Naomi's plan, but Ruth was also prepared for the other possibility. Like Tamar, Ruth is willing to endanger her future in order to perpetuate the name of the deceased and rebuild Naomi's family. Undoubtedly, though, she preferred the first possibility, and thus asked Boaz, "Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman" (3:9). It turns out, then, that just as Naomi's primary goal is Ruth's security, so is Ruth's objective to find security for her mother-in-law and rebuild her family's ruins.

TO PERPETUATE THE NAME OF THE DECEASED UPON HIS ESTATE

Is it proper to perpetuate the deceased's name in such a fashion?

To answer this question, we must analyze the mitzva of yibbum (levirate marriage) as the Torah describes it in Sefer Devarim (25:5-8):

Verse 5: When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her, take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty.

Verse 6: The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.

Verse 7: But if the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare: "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir."

Verse 8: The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, "I do not want to marry her," his brother's widow shall go up to him...

The first verse in this sdescribes the case – "When brothers dwell together and one of them dies" – and establishes the halakha that applies in such a case – "the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger... Her husband's brother shall... perform the levir's duty." This halakha consists of both a prohibition ("the wife... shall not be married to a stranger") and a positive imperative ("Her husband's brother shall unite with her").

The structure of the positive command requires explanation. It begins with the obligation to engage in marital relations ("unite with her") and proceeds to describe the process of marriage ("take her as his wife") and then again mentions the "levir's duty." This verse would appear to be constructed in the form of "kelal u-prat," whereby it first presents the general goal – "unite with her" – and then specifies how it is achieved: "take her as a wife and perform the levir's duty." The Torah thus establishes that, although the underlying purpose of yibbum is the union between the brother and the widow to perpetuate the name of the deceased, this must be done only through the process of marriage. Towards this end, the Torah permits the otherwise forbidden marriage to one's sister-in-law. It emerges, then, that even the lofty purpose of perpetuating the name of the deceased does not permit an illicit relationship. (The Biblical Encyclopedia records an ancient Indian custom that when a childless man dies, his brother must perpetuate the deceased's name by begetting children from the widow, but he may not marry her. The Torah in these verses intends to establish the exact opposite law.)

This idea receives added emphasis in verses 7-8, which deal with a situation where the brother refuses to fulfill his obligation. These verses make a clear distinction between the terms "lekicha" (marriage) and "yibbum" (the levir's duty), establishing that if the man "does not want to marry his brother's widow," then "yibbum" cannot occur, even though in theory the deceased's name can be perpetuated outside the context of marriage. The brother says, "I do not want to marry her," whereas the widow declares, "He will not perform the duty of the levir." Meaning, the brother's refusal to marry the widow, even if he agrees to the act of yibbum, effectively amounts to the cancellation of the yibbum and preventing the perpetuation of the deceased's name. The Torah thereby retroactively renders Tamar's act illegitimate, despite her noble, sincere motives and her willingness to sacrifice her future and even her life.

KINDNESS AND TRUTH MEET

Similarly, Ruth's visit to the threshing floor, had it proceeded according to Naomi's plan, would not have fulfilled the Torah's command, despite the fact that we are dealing with two single individuals who are permitted to marry one another. The Torah demands that marriage precede the act of yibbum, whereas Naomi had intended for the act of yibbum to lead to marriage. Although Naomi's scheme would have resulted in the fulfillment of the mitzva of ge'ula (redeeming the lost property of a relative), it was to have begun with Boaz satisfying his desires, rather than performing a mitzva. Had events transpired according to Naomi's expectations, this would not have corrected Tamar's mistake and would most certainly not have been worthy of the glory and grandeur associated with this story.

The unique quality of Megillat Ruth stems from the fact that the problem arising from Ruth's remarkable loyalty to Naomi was overcome by Boaz's extraordinary strength. Boaz understood that he must not allow Ruth's kindness towards Naomi to fade into the dark of night at the threshing floor. The existence of "another redeemer closer than I" (3:12) need not have prevented Boaz from performing the yibbum, for although primary responsibility falls upon the oldest brother, the mitzva can be fulfilled by the younger brother as well. Furthermore, Naomi was undoubtedly aware of the closer relative, and yet sent Ruth specifically to Boaz. Boaz knew that in order for Ruth to receive full reward for her kindness, her redemption must be carried out in all its details in strict compliance with Jewish law, in the presence of witnesses and elders. Only a redemption of this sort could have earned Boaz and Ruth the blessing, "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel" (4:11). Indeed, the Midrash comments (Ruth Rabba 6:2) that Boaz and Ruth were blessed with children in the merit of this blessing bestowed upon them by the righteous elders and people at the gate.

It is thus that moment at the threshing floor, when Boaz controlled his inclination, that marks the climax of the Megilla. In a rare demonstration of profound understanding of the soul of another, Boaz recognized the purity of Ruth's motives, and thus blessed her, rather than cursing her. From this point on, after the three main figures in the Megilla – Naomi, Ruth and Boaz – fulfilled their role, events could transpire naturally, as if on their own:

"Boaz had gone to the gate and sat down there, and now the redeemer whom Boaz had mentioned passed by – had he been standing just behind the gate?

Rav Shemuel Bar Nachman said: Even had he been at the other end of the world, the Almighty would have flown him and brought him there in order that this righteous man [Boaz] should not have to sit in distress...

Rabbi Eliezer said: Boaz did his, Ruth did hers, and Naomi did hers; the Almighty then said: I, too, will do Mine." (Ruth Rabba 7:7)

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