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בס"ד

## Reflections on Megillat Ruth

### 1. Introduction

Megillat Ruth is a superbly crafted short story possessing all the elements of great literature. While sparing of descriptive detail, it is cast in a charming, idyllic setting, with astutely portrayed characters who engage in deft dialogue. It contains dramatic use of tension in scenes that shift from life-affecting decisions to subtle expectation to disappointment and finally to felicity. It is replete with rich, potent allusions to trying human circumstances and profound notions, often conveyed through subtle references to scriptural contexts and concepts. On the surface it is an example of G-d's reward for righteous behavior, specifically that of kindness and loyalty, and illustrates how with such behavior one may rise from the most humble state to royal heights, providing thereby a message of profound and universal import.

The Megillah also possesses a metaphoric dimension that transmits hope and inspiration to a nation in despair. The latter was very possibly the reason for its composition and inclusion in Scripture, a matter we shall discuss later in the study.

On the basic narrative level, the Megillah describes the trials and tribulations of Ruth, a young Moabite woman who was widowed from a Judean man who had been living in her country. A woman of excellent character, Ruth possessed a remarkable degree of love and devotion to her widowed and bereaved mother-in-law. The Megillah depicts her courageous, unwavering decision to forsake her family, nation and god in order to remain with her mother-in-law and join Israel and its G-d, despite the significant hardships and stigma that were involved in doing so. This was an exceptional decision as she had not had any children.

Although not a word is said concerning her personal considerations in making such a life-altering decision,

one cannot ignore the message transmitted between the lines. Clearly, Ruth had a Moabite family to which she could have returned, as Naomi – who surely was familiar with her family situation – continually advised, even urged, her to do. But she obviously had been deeply and compellingly impacted by the family she married into, despite the fact that it had separated from its patrimony and intermarried with Moabites. In light of the problems she would be expected to face as a Moabite in Israel, her choice is an impressive testimony to her appreciation of the merit of Israel's heritage, essentially its G-d and His laws. As Boaz remarked concerning her decision, referring to her relationship with the G-d of Israel, "May Hashem reward your deeds ... that you have come to take refuge under His wings" (Ruth 2:12). Ultimately, she is rewarded with marriage and progeny from which Israel's national royal family stems.

In illustrating how the most glorious outcome may result from humble and alien origins, provided there is sincerity, goodness and perseverance, the Megillah is an important commentary on the Torah. Underlying the narrative is the theme of G-d's behind-the-scenes involvement, influencing events to help the righteous succeed in pursuing their worthy goals. But there is much more as we shall discuss in due course.

### 2. Allusions to Abraham and Isaac

Ruth's extraordinary comportment is given fuller meaning, indeed, momentous significance, by the author's rich allusions to events in the lives of Abraham and Isaac. Parallels are drawn between Hashem's לֶךְ-לְךָ ("go forth") call to Abraham to leave his father's home to proceed to the promised land – the foundational test crucial to establishment of the nation of Israel – and Ruth's doing so. The account of divine providence at work in Abraham's servant finding the appropriate wife for Isaac is the backdrop to Ruth's meeting Boaz and the preliminaries that



she will draw water until the camels were through drinking: עַד אֲמַכְּלוּ (“until they finish”). Individuals of good character complete the task or responsibility of kindness they began. Again, these are the only two attestations of this locution in Scripture.

Upon the servant being seated in the home of Rebekah’s parents, he made a point of his desire to expedite his responsibility: “I will not eat until I speak my words” (Gen. 24:33). When Naomi senses that Boaz recognizes his responsibility, she comments that, “the man will not be quiet until he concludes the matter today” (Ruth 3:18). It is also praiseworthy to be prompt in fulfilling a responsibility one has accepted.

Finally, when Isaac marries Rebekah, the Torah states, וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רֵבֶקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (Gen. 24:67). When Boaz and Ruth marry, it states, וַיִּקַּח בְּעוֹ אֶת־רוּת וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (Ruth 4:13). These are the only two attestations in Scripture of this compound phrasal formula. The succeeding phrase in the Megillah, וַיִּבְרַא אֶלְיָהּ, is alliteratively linked to the immediately preceding phrase in that corresponding Genesis verse, וַיִּבְרָאָהּ יִצְחָק הָאֱלֹהִים.

With this full constellation of correlations the message is unmistakable. Ruth was a sincere convert to the nation of Israel; she sensed G-d’s call, following in the footsteps of Abraham (and Rebekah). As G-d intervened on behalf of Abraham to provide the proper wife for his son so did He on behalf of Naomi, to provide the proper husband for her daughter-in-law. Things come about in ways that to the casual observer might appear as happenstance but to the discerning eye are providential. Superlative virtues distinguished both Rebekah and Ruth. As Isaac and Rebekah deserved each other so too did Ruth and Boaz, and a notable future such as had materialized for the former couple was in store for the latter one.

### 3. The Moabite Connection

Awareness of the Torah legislation regarding Moabites is seemingly necessary to fully understand certain facets of the Megillah.

An Ammonite or Moabite may not enter the congregation of Hashem (הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה); even unto the tenth generation they may not enter the

congregation of Hashem, ever, because they did not come forward toward you with bread and water when you were on the journey coming out of Egypt and for hiring against you Balaam...to curse you (Deut. 23:4-5).

The Talmud limits the prohibition to males. One school of thought has it that it is essentially the males’ responsibility to come forth with bread and water for weary travelers, and another explains that the terms עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי (an Ammonite and Moabite) imply males (*b. Yebam. 76b-77a*). Since the logic of making a distinction between males and females was not so apparent, this permissibility for females was variously contested and not fully accepted in all places at all times. The Talmud, in its *aggadic* fashion, asserts that at one point it was necessary to threaten force to have the distinction accepted (*ibid.*).

When discouraging her daughters-in-law from returning with her by referring to the difficulty of marriage in Israel, Naomi may have been alluding to the potential problem related to the concept ensconced in these verses. When Naomi and Ruth entered Bethlehem, the whole town buzzed with surprise over them. However, contrary to the general practice in human society when a bereaved and needy widow returns home, there is no indication of any significant befriending of them. Undoubtedly, this was because of the Moabite stigma.

Although Boaz was greatly impressed with Ruth and encouraged her to remain in his fields, provided for her protection from molestation and allowed her privileges not accorded the other poor, in certain ways he remained aloof. He did not inform her of his being a close relative of her late father-in-law even upon discovering her connection to Naomi. He did not relieve her of the necessity to stand all day in the sun gathering gleanings so that she and her mother-in-law could survive. He made no effort to contact Naomi and took no initiative regarding redemption of the land. Despite his compassionate expressions these were disappointing omissions; based on the refusal of the closer redeemer (4:6) we may assume that they resulted from his fear of the Moabite connection.

It appears that Naomi’s awareness of Boaz’ fear explains why, at the end of the season, when she realized Ruth’s contact with Boaz was about to

conclude, she advised her to take matters into her own hands. She sensed that it was necessary to present Boaz with a powerful and clear-cut opportunity to face up to his responsibility and take the appropriate action, even if the only tactic available bordered on seduction. Her tactic recalls Tamar's strategy with Judah (Gen. 38). Oftentimes, even high-quality individuals are victims of fear and inertia and do not address matters of social justice that lie within their immediate sphere of human interaction until they are directly challenged, at which time they rise to the occasion.

When the relative closer than Boaz was informed that the condition of redeeming Elimelech's property involved marrying Ruth to establish the deceased's name on his property, he backed off, fearful it will ultimately damage his estate. He was presumably concerned that the law concerning a Moabite may one day be thought of as prohibiting marriage to Ruth. Boaz declared his willingness to redeem the land and marry Ruth. He called the elders and others to witness his intent and there was a large, public ceremony to confirm the transaction. The halakhah was firmly established that his marriage to Ruth was permitted and everybody extended blessings.

Boaz' name means "in whom is courage." He took the correct stand in accepting Ruth, although it may have been unpopular and although he knew that it would require ongoing steadfastness in the future.

#### 4. Another Aspect of Meaning

Additionally, the Megillah is a tale of a family's resurrection after having almost reached the point of obliteration. During a famine a man with his wife and two sons left Bethlehem of Judah to live in Moab. The singular and anonymous *איש אֶחָד* ("a man went"), following the general tone of the previous clause informing of a famine in the land, indicates that he left while others were not leaving Judah. We later discover that this man, Elimelech, possessor of a distinguished name meaning "my G-d is king," had been a landowner from a prominent family. Moving to Moab, he abandoned his heritage and people. He soon dies. His wife Naomi, "pleasantness," is left with the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, names meaning "sickness" and "destruction" respectively. Obviously these are

symbolic names, for people do not so call their sons. Indeed, all the Megillah's names appear to be symbolic.

Both sons marry Moabite wives and after ten years they also pass away, childless, leaving forlorn widows. All that remained of the family were the bereaved mother beyond child-bearing years and her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Upon Naomi's urging, Orpah returns to her family, her name apparently referring to the "back of the neck," derived from her action of turning away. The family that abandoned its spiritual legacy is now practically decimated, a significant statement about the negative consequences associated with leaving the land of Israel.

Nevertheless, the Megillah teaches, as long as there is life there is hope and redemption is possible. The restoration was brought about in a way impossible to have imagined – through the superlative loyalty, kindness and sacrifice of the remaining Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth.

In the Talmud (*b. B.Bat.* 14b) the view is expressed that Megillat Ruth was written by the prophet Samuel, at the end of the era of the judges (pre-1000 B.C.E.), relatively close to the time of its setting. However, the literary evidence indicates that it was composed some centuries later. It states, "Thus was the custom in former times in Israel...to validate a transaction, one man would take off his shoe and hand it to his fellow" (Ruth 4:7), implying it was written in an era when the old custom not only fell into disuse but was widely unknown. The Megillah's opening verse, "And it was in the days when the judges ruled" (1:1), is more suitable for an author living after the time of the judges, describing a time long past. While the Megillah's language is classic biblical, some of its diction and word usage appears more consistent with the exilic period, such as the words *te'agena* (1:13), *vayisbot* (2:14), and others. Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon was of the opinion that it was probably written about the time of the Babylonian exile of Judah in 586 B.C.E., part of the prophetic output of Jeremiah. At that time the national situation was bleak with the people deep in despair and in great need of encouragement to counteract their pessimism and prompt them to believe that there was hope for restoration.

The severe decline and near elimination of the family may very well be an allegory referring to the nation of Israel going into exile, beset by the enormous trials and tribulations that befell it there, tottering on the verge of extinction. In that case, the family's resurrection would refer to the amazing national revival and restoration of Israel when a small part of the remnant chose to sincerely commit itself to the covenant. Although the principles of repentance and return are detailed in the Torah, theoretical statements benefit from a story manifesting the principles at work. Indeed, when reading the last portion of the Deuteronomy execration section predicting the final chastisement in the land followed by exile with the problems continuing there (Deut. 28:59 ff.), one cannot help but think of the two sons who died prematurely and childless, מְהָלוֹן וְנִקְלִיוֹן (“sickness” and “destruction”). That Deuteronomy text explicitly speaks of sicknesses with the words הָלִים and הָלִי (59, 61) followed shortly afterwards by וְנִקְלִיוֹן עֵינַיִם (“a wasting away of the eyes” [65]).

Rabbi Sassoon understood the name רוּת (Ruth) as cognate with the Aramaic word יְרוּתָא (“inheritance”), corresponding to the Hebrew word for inheritance, יְרוּשָׁה, consistent with the rules of ש and ת transference between these languages. Thus, the heroine's name appropriately strikes the theme of the message. It is noteworthy that on the Moabite Stone (9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), the word for יְרוּשָׁה is written with a ת. (See *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, Heb. pp. 101-2)

## 5. Ruth and Tamar

As pointed out, Ruth's sincerely motivated clandestine attempt at union with Boaz (Ruth 3:9) recalls Tamar's sincere deception of her father-in-law Judah (Gen. 38), from which Perez, Boaz' paternal ancestor, derived.

There is unmistakable structural and conceptual linkage between the Genesis narrative concerning Tamar and the narrative of Ruth. At the head of the families are Judah and Elimelech. Judah separates from his brothers and home locale, marries a Canaanite woman and has sons (three), two of whom die prematurely and childless. Elimelech leaves his land with his two sons who marry Moabite women and who also die prematurely and childless. In both narratives carrying on the name of the deceased –

*yibum* or redemption – through the available widow becomes a central theme of the narrative as well as a primary goal of the female protagonist. The males, however, postpone or avoid it. Judah wrongly fears possible death for his remaining son through contact with Tamar while Elimelech's relative fears marriage with Ruth, which may “destroy” his estate, probably because of the Moabite connection.

At a critical point, when it appears that *yibum* or redemption will be put off indefinitely, the women act boldly. Tamar is told that Judah will be going to shear his sheep, a traditionally joyous time for sheep owners, presenting her an opportunity. Ruth is told that Boaz – Elimelech's relative who replaces him in the schematic plan – has concluded the harvest and will be winnowing his crop, also a joyous occasion, comparable to the sheep-shearing. At a time when Tamar knew Judah was vulnerable (having been consoled upon the death of his wife), she removes her widow's clothing, dresses for the occasion, and stations herself for her task of seducing Judah in a location where he cannot help but notice her. Ruth bathes, anoints herself, dresses appropriately and uncovers Boaz' sleeping blanket and slips under it at his feet. Tamar used deceit while Ruth employed stealth.

Judah yields to the temptation and Shelah, who was the more appropriate *yabam*, is pre-empted. The progeny that derives from that liaison includes Boaz. Boaz, on the other hand, exercises self-restraint – “she lay at his feet until morning” (Ruth 3:14) – explaining to Ruth that there is one relative closer with whom the primary rights and responsibilities reside. (Rabbi Sassoon thought this should be viewed as representative of Boaz correcting Judah's impetuosity.) When the first-in-line refuses to exercise his right Boaz marries Ruth. The blessing of the people and the elders includes, “And may thy house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore unto Judah” (4:12). From that relationship derives King David (v. 17).

## 6. General Remarks

As a Moabite, Ruth derived from Lot's liaison with his elder daughter (Gen. 19:37). Thus, King David, derived from Boaz and Ruth, had these formative “illicit” relationships on both paternal and maternal

pedigree lines. The wife of David's son Solomon, the mother of Rehoboam, through whom the royal line was carried forward, was Naamah the Ammonitess (1 Kings 14:21), a descendant of Lot's liaison with his younger daughter (Gen. 19:38).

That the royal line of Israel derives from such relationships teaches that a background of lowly birth does not relegate an individual to an ignoble life. Divine providence comes down on the side of purity of heart when joined with ongoing compassionate, altruistic and innocent intentions, as opposed to favoring the strict letter of the law.

In an interesting comment on the long reign of King David, in contrast to the much shorter one of King Saul, talmudic sages state: "We do not appoint a *parnas* over the public unless a קַפָּה שֶׁל שְׂרָצִים ('a basket of rodents,' signifying questionable background) is hanging from behind him, so that if he becomes haughty and arrogant, we can say to him 'look at your background'" (*b. Yoma* 22b).

The Yalkut Shimoni (Ruth 608) points out that every verse in Ruth begins with the letter *vav* except for eight. Rabbi Hiya expounds: This hints at Ruth's deep attachment to the covenant. Whether this statement

was intended as peshat or not, the number eight (as well as its decimal multiples) does signify the covenant (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*). It surely is noteworthy that the Megillah proper (excluding the five-verse epilogue which is a genealogical addenda) is composed of exactly eighty verses.

Regarding the custom to read Ruth on Shabuoth (cited in *Masekhet Soferim* 14:16), the following may be said: Since on that day we celebrate the nation's entering into the covenant, it is appropriate to read the inspiring story of an extraordinary individual who recognized the great value of sacrificing in order to be part of Israel and its heritage. It is also heartening to read of the magnificent reward G-d bestowed upon her. In addition, on this auspicious occasion it is proper to remind ourselves that the heritage of Israel is open to all sincere individuals who genuinely accept the responsibilities of the Torah, regardless of national or genealogical background, and that based on their personal merit they may rise to attain the foremost eminence within the nation.

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## מוֹעֲדִים לְשִׁמְתָהּ וְהַזְכּוֹ לְשָׁנִים רַבּוֹת