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בס"ד

Reflections on Megillat Ruth

I. 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 shifting from life-affecting decisions to subtle expectation to disappointment and finally felicity. It is replete with rich, potent allusions to trying human circumstances and profound notions often 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 *hesed*, 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 Megilla 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 Megilla 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 Megilla depicts her courageous, unwavering decision to forsake her family, nation and god 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 a particularly 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. She had a Moabite family to which she could have returned, as Naomi continually advised, even pressed, her to do, and as Boaz acknowledged in his expression of admiration for her decision to leave father and mother to join a people she had not known before. But she obviously had been deeply and compellingly impacted by the family she married into, despite it having 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 Megilla 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 Yishaq

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 Yishaq. Parallels are drawn between Hashem's *לך-לך* 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 successfully finding the appropriate wife for Yishaq is the backdrop to Ruth's meeting Boaz and the preliminaries that eventually lead to their marrying. We will survey the linkage, pointing out how extensive it is.

G-d's selection of Abraham entails the challenge of Abraham taking leave of land, kinfolk and father's home to go to a land he does not know לְךָ-לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ (Gen. 12:1). Ruth's decision to attach herself to Naomi contains similar elements and is described in strikingly comparable language. When Naomi tried to dissuade her daughters-in-law from accompanying her from Moab to Judah, she said: לֵכְנָה שְׁבֹנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּהּ "go, return, each woman to her mother's home" (Ruth. 1:8). As a woman speaking to women to return home, the more emotional-laden "mother's home" is substituted for the more technically-correct "father's home." Ruth's response includes אֶל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלַי ("to wherever you go I shall go") recalling לְךָ-לֵךְ (v. 16).

She continues with a comprehensive commitment to the nation of Israel and its G-d, corresponding to Abraham's response - silent but nonetheless salient - in hearkening to the Divine call to go to a land he does not know. Later, Boaz strikes similar notes in commending Ruth for וַתֵּצֵא אֶת-בְּנֵי אִמֶּךָ וְאֶת-אֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתְּךָ וַתֵּצֵא אֶת-אֶלֶּם אֶל-עַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתָּ "you left father, mother and land of your birth and moved to a nation you did not previously know" (2:11).

When Abraham's servant, while on his mission to find a wife for Yishaq, arrived at his destination, he was נֹצֵב, "standing watchfully" at the well from which the town's young ladies drew water. He beseeched Hashem, הַקְרֵה-נָא לְפָנַי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה-חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם, "make it chance before me this day and do kindness with my master Abraham" (Gen. 24:12). When Ribqah appeared, her magnificent response to his request included: אֶשְׁאֵב עַד אִם-כִּלּוֹ לְשִׁתּוֹת "I will draw until they conclude drinking," quenching their thirst (v. 19). When the servant's character test - essentially looking for kindness and sensitivity - was concluded, he asked, "whose daughter are you?" Immediately upon her answer - learning that she is from the right family - he gives her gifts. Each of these elements has

a thematic or distinctive linguistic parallel in the corresponding Megilla scene.

When Ruth first went out to the fields to pick gleanings, וַיִּקַּר מִקְרָהּ, "it chanced for her to come upon the portion of the field that belonged to Boaz" (Ruth 2:3). Boaz asked his assistant הַנּוֹצֵב עַל-הַקּוֹצְרִים, "who stood watchfully" over the harvesters, "to whom is this girl?" (v. 5). (In the following verse the foreman is again mentioned as הַנּוֹצֵב עַל-הַקּוֹצְרִים.) Immediately upon being told of Ruth's family connection, Boaz, having previously heard of her beneficence, begins extending her great kindness. He tells her that when she becomes thirsty she may go to the vessels וְשָׁתִיתִי מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאָבוּן הַנְּעָרִים, "and drink from where the lads draw" (2:9), introducing the linkage of both a water-drawing site as well as a thirst-quenching gesture into the narrative.

Abraham's servant gave thanks to Hashem: בְּרוּךְ ה'... אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ וְאֱמֻתּוֹ "Blessed is Hashem... who has not forsaken His kindness and truth from my master" Gen. v. 27). He states his appreciation that Hashem led him to his master's brethren. Although his mission still required great effort to bring the indicated result to fruition, G-d had spoken and the servant realized it; he now focused his efforts on bringing about the marriage. Meanwhile, Ribqah goes home and reports to her family (לְבֵית אִמָּהּ) on what transpired (v. 28).

Ruth returns to her mother-in-law and relates the day's events. Although there is a long way to go, Naomi immediately senses Divine Providence at work and the matrimonial and redemption potential for her daughter-in-law, which she must still nurture with great skill to actualize. She expresses her thanksgiving to Hashem with the following words: בְּרוּךְ הוּא לֵה'... אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ "Blessed be he to Hashem who has not forsaken His kindness" (Ruth 2:20). It is noteworthy that these Genesis and Ruth usages of the phrase אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ are the only two attestations of this locution in Scripture. Naomi then proclaims that Hashem has led Ruth to a relative - קָרוֹב לָנוּ הָאִישׁ הוּא, using words very similar to those of the servant, that Hashem has led him to take the daughter of "אָחִי אֲדֹנָי" (my master's brother) for his son. In redemption contexts, "redeemer" and "brother" are employed virtually synonymously (see Lev. 25).

Ruth added a detail: Boaz had also told her, “Stay close to my young men until they conclude all my harvest” (Ruth 2:21). He had employed the phrase “עַד אֲמֹנִים” (“until they complete”) just as Ribqah did when informing the servant that she will draw water until the camels were through drinking. 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 Ribqah’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 Yishaq marries Ribqah, the Torah states, וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי־לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (Gen. 24:67). When Boaz and Ruth marry, it states, וַיִּקַּח בְּעוֹ אֶת־רוּת וַתְּהִי־לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (Ruth 4:13). These are the only two attestations in Scripture of this compound phrasal formula. The succeeding phrase in the Megilla, “וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים” is alliteratively linked to the immediately preceding phrase in that corresponding Genesis verse, “וַיִּבְרָא יְצֻרֵק הָאֱהָלָה.”

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 Ribqah). 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 Ribqah and Ruth. As Yishaq and Ribqah deserved each other so too did Ruth and Boaz, and a notable future was in store for the latter couple as had materialized for the former one.

3. The Moabite Connection

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

An Ammonite or Moabite may not enter בְּקִהְלֵהָ (the congregation of Hashem); even the tenth generation they may not enter בְּקִהְלֵהָ, 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 interpretation has it that it is essentially the males’ responsibility to come forth with bread and water to weary travelers and another explains that the terms עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי (an Ammonite and Moabite) imply males (BT *Yeb.* 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 and having a conversation with her. 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 response of the closer potential redeemer (4:6) we may surely 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 Elimelekh'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 halakha was firmly established that 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 Megilla 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 וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ אֶתְּ, 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, Elimelekh, 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 Khilyon, names meaning "sickness" and "destruction" respectively. Obviously these are symbolic names, for people do not so call their sons. Indeed, all the Megilla'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 Megilla 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 (BT *B.Batra* 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 BCE), 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 Megilla'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 Megilla'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 BCE, 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. The family's resurrection refers to the amazing national revival and restoration of Israel when the remnant, apparently 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, מַחֲלוֹן וְכַלְיוֹן ("Sickness" and "Destruction"). That Deuteronomy text explicitly speaks of sicknesses with the words חֲלָיִים and חֲלָי (59, 61) followed shortly afterwards by וְכַלְיוֹן עֵינַיִם (65)! The intertextual linkage appears to be there.

Rabbi Sassoon understood the name רות (Ruth) as derived from the Aramaic word יְרוּתָא "inheritance," corresponding to the Hebrew word 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 (9th Century BCE), the word for יְרוּשָׁה appears 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 Peres, Boaz' paternal ancestor, derived.

There is unmistakable structural and conceptual linkage between the Genesis narrative concerning Tamar and that of Ruth. At the head of the families

are Judah and Elimelekh. Judah separates from his brothers and home locale, marries a Canaanite woman and has sons (three), two of whom die prematurely and childless. Elimelekh 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 a female protagonist. The males, however, postpone or avoid it. Judah wrongly fears possible death for his remaining son through contact with Tamar while Elimelekh'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 – Elimelekh'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 Peres 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 Rehab'am, through whom the royal line was carried forward, was Na'ama Ha'Ammonit (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 שָׂרָצִים (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'" (BT *Yoma* 22b).

The Yalkut Shimoni (Ruth 608) points out that every verse in Ruth begins with a "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 Megilla proper (excluding the five-verse epilogue which is a genealogical addenda) is composed of exactly eighty verses.

Regarding the custom to read Ruth on Shabu'ot (cited in *Masekhet Sofrim* 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 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 לְשִׁמְחָה וְתִזְכוּ לְשָׁנִים רַבּוֹת