

Chag HaShavuot

Megillat Ruth and the Shoftim Period

The reading of the Book of Ruth is one of the beautiful customs of Chag Hashavuot. It is a picturesque and emotive story, and each year we are swept up, yet again, in the familiar yet exciting drama. We tensely follow the destitute Naomi and Ruth as they walk through along the footpaths and country lanes of Moav and the harsh landscape of Judea, deeply concerned for their fate. We watch excitedly as Ruth picks the gleanings from the field, hoping that someone will ensure that she brings home enough food at the day's end. We share the anticipation as we wonder whether Ruth will indeed marry Boaz and be able to set up a happy Jewish family, bringing the tragedy of the past to a brighter future, and indeed this is a story with a happy end.

However, I am not sure whether we realise quite how unusual and revolutionary the book of Ruth is. I think that if we examine this story in the light of its historical backdrop – the period of the Shoftim – and the book that parallels it – Sefer Shoftim – we shall understand how the message of Megillat Ruth is surprising and novel.

Megillat Ruth begins with the phrase: "And it came to pass, in the days of the Judges." Chazal suggest¹ that the both the Book of Judges AND the Book of Ruth were authored by the same individual – the prophet Shmuel. Two books describe the same period. And yet, I would suggest that the books differ radically.

THE SHOFTIM PERIOD.

The period of the Judges lasted for over three hundred years. This period was a very difficult one for the young Israelite nation. Throughout these years the country was repeatedly overrun by alien oppressors, neighbouring states looking to expand their borders and to take advantage of the weakness of the Israelite nation. But these were not bad times simply from a military or national perspective. We can delineate at least four areas in which the Shoftim period was a disaster.

1. The fragile national security situation

As we have mentioned, the book of Judges talks about an entire collection of adversaries: Assyria, Moab, the Canaanite king Yavin, Midyan, Amalek, Ammon, the Philistines. The enemy intruders destroy the crops and commerce of the country, oppress and tax, and generally squeeze the Israelites to a situation in which normal life was unbearable. This phenomena occurs nationally throughout the country; there is no region which does not suffer, at one time or another from the national weakness. When one enemy subsides, another arises.

2. The nature of the Judge-leader

Despite the existence of certain Judge-leaders, the primary characteristic of the time is **the absence of a coherent NATIONAL leadership structure.**

The "Judges" as they are known, were ad-hoc leaders, individuals who rose to greatness by responding to the need of the moment. Invariably, the leader for any particular crisis situation emerged from the tribe which found itself at the epicentre of the problem or crisis. All of the "judges" are connected to military success. They always fight in the name of the God of Israel. But they are very much the transient heroes of the moment. In the same way that they rise to leadership and fame out of nothing, they fade rapidly into oblivion as a leading force in their tribe, or the nation as a whole. After their passing, they leave no successor and no continued leadership structure.

It is not too difficult to realise that the problems of national security would not have been nearly as acute had there been a leader with a national agenda and vision. A national leader can have a standing army that will act as deterrent to potential invaders. A figurehead gives the nation a focus, an identity. Central government can plan, can coordinate the resources and actions of a state on a macro level. Maybe a useful way to demonstrate the difference between the power of a Judge and a national leader is to note that in the wars that the Judges fought, the army never exceeded 40,000 fighting men. In contrast, King Saul, the first national leader manages to summon 330,000 soldiers in his first campaign (I Samuel 11:8.)

3. Low Spiritual Level

This period is characterised by a powerful attraction to foreign deities. The most popular gods would have been the Ba'al and the Ashtoret, the gods of Canaan, but others were served as well. In the Tanach, it is this turning away from the God of Israel, their "straying" after pagan culture, which angers God leading Him to remind them of His presence by subjecting them to oppression and national failure.

4. Inter-tribal friction

The nation does not see itself as a single cohesive unit in the period of the Judges. Frequently, tribes of Israel would simply fail to come to the assistance of their beleaguered brethren. Sometimes there are outbursts of inter-tribal violence, or civil-war

The problems of this era, as we can see, were enormous, complex, and not easily solved.

THE PERSPECTIVE FROM SEFER SHOFTIM

On the one hand, Sefer Shoftim blames the ills of the era upon the sin of Avoda Zara – Idolatry. It describes a recurring cycle of events, as follows:

1. Israel sin, serving other gods, local deities like Ba'al and Ashtarot.
2. God delivers them to their enemies.
3. They cry out (moan -v.18) to God
4. He appoints a leader to save them and keep their allegiance to God.
5. The leader dies and they return to stage 1.

¹ Bava Batra 14b – "שמואל כתב ספרו ושופטים ורות"

In other words, God punishes the people for abandoning His service. The lack of national security is a direct outgrowth of the lack of religious commitment of the nation.

But, on the other hand, Sefer Shoftim is also aware of another cause:

"In those days there was no king in Israel and every man did as he pleased." (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25.)

In other words, there is a political cause and also a religious explanation for the abysmal state of the nation. Looking at Sefer Shoftim, one realizes that the solution lies in transforming both of these areas.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

Megillat Ruth describes the same reality but from a very different vantage point. Chazal suggest that Elimelech left the country due to the hardships faced during this period². People abandon a country in times of famine and violence. Apparently this family had the means to live abroad and to survive there deciding to become refugees rather than face the frequent invasions and foreign occupation in Eretz Yisrael.

Megillat Ruth is the civilian side of the conflict, in which dignified families, reputable, landowning folk, become refugees. But it is also a time in which individuals are reluctant to lend a helping hand. People are unwilling to assist even family members because they are frightened for their own future. It is a time when Jewish life is far from certain or secure.

Rather than taking the national vantage point, a grand sweeping vision of things, Megillat Ruth tells a human story, a story of a single family that has to survive the torment that is swirling around them.

As we know, the move abroad did the family no good. Elimelech and his sons all die. And now Naomi is left alone and penniless. (Chazal once again attribute this to their leaving Eretz Yisrael)

But how is the problem solved? Through kindness and charity!

- Ruth's kindness to Naomi (2:1).
- Boaz's consideration of Ruth (2:19,21).
- Ruth's devotion to Boaz (3:10).
- Boaz's commitment to Elimelech (4:14, 9).
- Ruth's fulfilment of her commitment to her dead husband (4:10).

The way in which one reaches redemption in the story of Ruth is through Chessed, living up to life's responsibilities, caring for those around us, thinking beyond ourselves.

It is quite remarkable that Shmuel wrote two books about the period. In the first, he suggests (or God suggests! – after all it is a prophetic book!) that the nation will be saved through a religious transformation and through an organized central government. In this regard Shmuel acts as a true statesman, attempting to guide the course of national events.

² **רש"י רות פרק א** **Rashi on Ruth 1:2** based upon Baba Batra 91b. וילך איש - עשיר גדול היה ופרנס הדור ויצא מארץ ישראל לחוצה לארץ מפני צרות העין שהיתה עינו צרה בעיניי הבאים לדוחקו לכך נענש:

Chazal talk about him as a wealthy man in his early period in Yehuda. Maybe we can surmise this by the fact that people immediately recognize Naomi (1:19) but are shocked by her withered appearance. Moreover, it is clear that Elimelech left certain properties (4:3) that needed "Redemption" and hence we can suggest that he was a man of at least moderate wealth.

But in his second book, he suggests a radically different direction, suggesting that through small but heroic acts of kindness, one may change a world, one may induce redemption. Moreover, one may lead the way to the birth of King David himself! Just through simple but heartfelt acts of Kindness and responsibility! Public policy is the arena of the nation, and yet, here we see actions on the personal and familial scale.

In this book, the verb "GA'AL" - meaning "Redemption" – appears 24 times! That is quite a high frequency for a short book. Ruth is a book of Redemption, and **Redemption is the small kindnesses that people perform for one another.**

IN CONCLUSION

Shavuot is strongly centred upon the *Bein Adam Lamakom* dimension of things. After all, it is on this "*zman matan torateinu*" that we celebrate the eternal covenant enacted at Mt. Sinai. At that historic moment in time we agreed to be a "Kingdom of priests and a holy nation" and God responded with revelation and Torah. When Chazal describe the Maamad Har Sinai (the assembly and revelation at Sinai) as a wedding, they encapsulate the essence of things. It is not the particular Torah that we received on this day that is our focus. Rather, on this day we mark the fact that we as a nation became eternally tied to the Almighty by means of Torah.

And so, our Torah reading discusses the account of the Revelation at Sinai. The Haftara discusses the Revelation of Yechezkel in which the prophet Yechezkel was given a revelation of God's "Merkava" witnessing the angels, fire and sounds that surround God's presence. This day then, is about God's revelation.

Against this backdrop, Megillat Ruth comes as something of a surprise. Ruth is not a story of revelation. It is a very human story with deep human yearnings, fear, insecurities, and kindness, consideration and responsibility. It is a *Bein Adam Lechavero* story. Once again; where is the thunder and lightening and angels and fear? How does Ruth fit into the landscape of Shavuot?

It could be that Megillat Ruth is the MOST APPROPRIATE dimension of Shavuot! After all the Torah never specifies that Matan Torah happened on 6th Sivan. But it is EXPLICIT in Vayikra ch.23 that Shavuot is a time for caring for the poor. There – in the paragraph that details Chag HaBikkurim - it states:

"And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God" (23:22)

If there is ONE THING that we know about Chag Hashavuot, it is this description. When the Torah directs our attention to the Shavuot, it is focussed upon the harvest. And in thinking about the harvest, the Torah wishes to ensure that we are fully aware of the laws that apply at harvest time, laws that have the poor and disadvantaged at the forefront of their attention. And hence, might we suggest a very radical message for Megillat Ruth? That God is revealed in impressive spectacles, thunder and lightening, but God is also manifest in the small, sensitive acts of kindness that we can all do for one another.

Chag Sameach!