

Thinking Torah

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Chag HaShavuot

Megillat Ruth and the story of Yehuda & Tamar - a study in Biblical Contrast.

Why do we read Megillat Ruth on Chag HaShavuot? What joins the two together?¹

Some have suggested that it is Ruth's "conversion" to Judaism that establishes a connection with the festival of Matan Torah. Whereas Ruth actively adopts a life as a Jew (an Israelite too) and signifies her acceptance of the mitzvot, likewise on the national level, at Matan Torah the entire nation adopted a life of Mitzva, thereby undergoing a national conversion of sorts. Indeed, the Gemara in Yevamot 47b presents Ruth as the archetypal convert:

"When [Naomi] saw how determined she {Ruth} was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her' (Ruth 1:18)

Said Naomi: 'We are forbidden to walk beyond the limit (techum) on Shabbat'

- 'Where you walk I will walk' (replied Ruth²)

'Yichud (seclusion with a member of the opposite gender) is forbidden to us!³

- 'Where you sleep I will sleep!'

'We have been given 613 commands.'

- 'Your people are my people!'

'We are prohibited from Idol worship'

- 'Your God is my God!'

'The Beit Din can issue the death sentence'

'Where you die I shall die!...'

There is no doubt that this imaginary conversation captures the sense of total transition that Ruth the Moabite, will have to undergo in emigrating to Eretz Yisrael, absorbing herself into the fabric of another nation, with a new religion. She, an outsider, demonstrates remarkable dedication and titanic strength in her absolute resolve to pursue her future amongst the people of Israel. This willing acceptance of a code of conduct and identity that will forever transform Ruth's life, is exactly the commitment that Am Yisrael as a nation undertook at the covenant of Sinai.

HARVEST

The simplest connection however, between Megillat Ruth and Shavuot relates to the seasonal-agricultural dimension of Shavuot, namely, the harvest. It is the harvest which is singled out as THE primary characteristic of Chag Hashvuot in the Torah; Chag HaKatzir⁴, the Harvest festival. It is precisely the harvest which provides the backdrop to the Ruth story. Boaz and Ruth meet as Ruth gathers the forgotten gleanings of the poor in Boaz's field. The image of Boaz sleeping at his threshing floor, apparently guarding his produce, also conjures up the rich images of harvest time.

One comment is worth making at this juncture. Shavuot has a severe paucity of mitzvot if compared to its sister-festivals, Sukkot and Pesach. What mitzvot does Shavuot have?

There is no Shavuot equivalent to the mitzvot of Sukka and Arba'ah Minim, nothing to match the richness of the laws of Chometz and Matza. When we study Chapter 23 in Sefer Vayikra, the most comprehensive parsha that details the festivals, we find no personal mitzvot associated with Shavuot. Only sacrificial Temple rite. However, we do read a passage in Leviticus Chapter 23 which appears to be strangely out of place since it does not relate to laws of festivals. It almost seems like a mistaken insertion to the Parsha. The section reads:

"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)

These are the laws which follow the description of Chag Hashavuot. We may state unequivocally that these are agricultural laws which do not apply on festivals. After all, a farmer must desist from his farm labour on festivals. Why do these verses interject into the series of festivals? One answer seems to spring intuitively to mind. That 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.

But is it not interesting that Megillat Ruth revolves around the mitzva of the harvest gleanings, leket and shikcha? It is precisely this practice which we observe as Ruth enters Boaz's fields. Is this not a fascinating connection with Chag Hashavuot? The mitzva which animates chag hashavuot more than any other is the mitzva of caring for the poor at harvest time!

CHESED – SELFLESS GIVING.

It is this point which directs us to a third focus within Megillat Ruth, the notion of Chesed.

"Rabbi Zeira said: This Megilla contains not impurity nor purity, not the forbidden nor the permitted. Nonetheless it has been written to publicise the extent of the reward that is bestowed upon people who engage in acts of kindness and welfare (Gemilut Chasadim.)" (Ruth Rabba 2:14)

Megillat Ruth is characterized by acts of kindness and concern for others. Acts of selfless giving abound in this book. Naomi demonstrates unusual selflessness as she encourages her daughters in law to leave her so that they may rebuild their own lives. Ruth's dedication and ongoing care for Naomi is representative of a character filled with sensitivity, giving⁵ and loyalty. Boaz, even in his role as farmer promotes heightened sensitivity to the poor as he instructs his farm-hands to treat Ruth respectfully and kindly, beyond the call of duty. Later in the story, Boaz demonstrates his loyalty and kindness to Ruth personally, and to Elimelech's family, by "redeeming" Ruth and marrying her.

from the word "On" with connotations of mourning and pain⁸.

Even the word "chesed" appears repeatedly in the Sefer:

Naomi to her daughters in law:

"May the Lord deal kindly (chesed) with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me!"(1:8)

Naomi talking about Boaz:

"Blessed be he to the Lord who has not failed in his kindness (chesed) to the living and the dead."(2:20)

Boaz to Ruth:

"Be blessed of the Lord, my daughter! Your latest deed (chesed) is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men..."(3:10)

THE TAMAR CONNECTION.

It is at this point that I would like to draw our attention to a remarkable parallel between two seemingly distant Biblical stories⁶. There are times when we get the feeling as we read a particular parsha that the text resonates with echoes of another Biblical text. I am talking about the story of Ruth and Boaz on the one hand, and the episode of Yehuda and Tamar (Bereshit ch.38) on the other.

The connection begins as we identify references to the Yehuda and Tamar episode explicitly in at least two places in Megillat Ruth. First, as the townsfolk bless Boaz on his impending marriage to Ruth, we read:

"Let your house be as the house of Peretz who Tamar bore to Yehuda - through the offspring that God will give you by this young woman." (4:12)

In this vein, we then read of a further reference to Peretz. The book ends with a genealogical list which connects Boaz and Ruth to King David. However, rather than starting the inter-generational chain from Boaz, the Megilla starts the list from Peretz, the son of Yehuda. Why? Why the focus upon this virtually anonymous character who never features as an independent personality in the Torah? What is the connection to Peretz?

I believe that the book of Ruth is pointing our attention in the direction of the strange episode of Yehuda and Tamar. Let us examine the similarities between the stories.

SIMILARITIES

1. The stories begin with Yehuda, and Elimelech (from the tribe of Yehuda) leaving their brethren. Cf. Ber. 38:1 and Ruth 1:1.

2. They each have sons who marry foreign women.

3. **The sons die.** The precise reasons for their deaths are left, in the most part, hidden or cryptic, leaving us to wonder why they died? With Er and Onan, they die because they sinned. How about Machlon and Chilyon?

Names⁷: What these men all have in common are names with most negative associations, names indicative of sickness and destruction. Machlon from "machala" (sickness,) Kilyon from "kelaya" (destruction.) Likewise "Er" is from the word "Ariri" indicating childlessness, and "Onan"

4. **Yibum:** The widows; Ruth and Orpah in one story, and Tamar in the other story, are seen as responsible in some way for continuing the line, the name, of their dead husbands. (Compare Bereshit 38:8 with Ruth 4:5,10.) Indeed both Tamar and Ruth seem to demonstrate a determination to see this become a reality.

Interestingly, the term YB"M indicating Yibum appears in the entire Tanach only TWICE outside the parsha which details the practice (in Devarim ch.25.) Those two places are in the story of Tamar (38:8) and Ruth (1:15)

5. A refusal to perform Yibum:

Onan refuses to fulfil his role in Yibum – "Onan, knowing that the offspring would not be his, let his seed go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife so as not to provide offspring for his brother." (38:9) Here too, in the book of Ruth, the anonymous relative of Elimelech, happy to redeem Elimelech's property, refuses to marry Ruth on the grounds that "I impair my own estate." (4:6)

6. In each case, there is an attempt to discourage the widow from fulfilling her role with the argument that the potential candidate is not yet "grown up."

With Tamar: "Judah said to his daughter-in-law: Stay a widow in your father's house until my son, Shelah **grows up**" (Ber. 38:11) With Ruth, Naomi says: "Turn back my daughters, for I am too old to be married...even if I were married tonight and I bore sons, should you wait for them **to grow up**?" (1:12-13)

7. Despite the fact that initiation of the Yibum process would appear to fall upon the men, in each story, women take matters into their own hands, in rather unconventional ways in order to bring about the desired result. In each story the man is passive in this regard, and it is the woman who takes the initiative.

8. The notion of changing clothing is mentioned in each story. Tamar – 38:14. Ruth 3:3.

9. In both stories the woman succeeds and achieves her goal. Moreover, in both cases, the person who is the optimal candidate to fill the role of "redeemer" takes upon himself that responsibility. (Obviously, the primary candidate refuses. See point 5 above.)

10. Common language: For example the usage of the verb "Haker" – to recognize. Cf. Bereshit 38:25 and the usage of verb in reference to Boaz in ch.2 vs. 10,19.

So where does this leave us? What is the nature of the connection between the stories? I am sure that with this degree of evidence, there is no question that a connection does exist. The question is, why did the book of Ruth use the words and imagery of the Tamar story to tell its own narrative?

DIFFERENCES

Despite the convincing similarities that we have presented, I would like to dwell for a moment or two on the stark differences between the two stories. It is these glaring differences that should point to the deliberate contrast between the two episodes.

1. Naomi sends Ruth back to her parental home out of concern for Ruth's welfare. This is not the case with Yehuda. Yehuda sends Tamar to her parental home out of concern for his own son. He intended to remove her from the scene.

2. Whereas Tamar conceives of her secret scheme herself and carries it out fully, Ruth does not plan the nighttime visit to Boaz. It is Naomi who conceives of the plan.

Moreover, whereas Tamar uses disguise and false role-play to have Yehuda sleep with her, Ruth does not hide her identity from Boaz, nor does she sleep with him.

3. Tamar becomes pregnant to Yehuda in an illegitimate act of subterfuge. Her motives were pure but her actions were highly questionable. Conversely, Ruth waits for Boaz until the entire arrangement has been worked out legally. Both from Ruth and Boaz's perspective, this is a legitimate relationship.

Where does this lead us? Let me quote from a shiur by Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein⁹, where he makes a wonderfully insightful observation about the Yehuda/Tamar story:

"The cardinal sin in these happenings is not the sexual licentiousness of the parties involved, but the treatment of Tamar. Both Yehuda and his sons treat her as an object to be used (or abused) for their own benefit and pleasure, refusing to relate to her as a human being worthy of respect and recognition as such, whose needs, emotional and other, must be taken into account. Initially manifesting itself in the crude and boorish behavior of Er and Onan, it is true of their father as well.

Er and Onan treat Tamar as a sex object. Desiring of sexual pleasure, they are unwilling to assume the attendant responsibility of parenthood nor do they take into account the needs of Tamar, yearning to realize herself as a mother. Their egotism can only view other human beings as means for serving their own needs and cannot recognize their value or autonomy.

This approach, though, does not originate with them, for it is characteristic of their father as well. Yehuda's response to the deaths of his two sons is to force upon Tamar a waiting period of years, without consulting her or attempting to understand her perspective. Tamar is a

woman who has lost both husbands, in need of physical and emotional security and stability, disinclined to marry yet a third brother of the same family while not necessarily interested in a solitary existence as a young and wasted widow waiting for a young child to mature at his father's leisure. Tamar may indeed have been willing, as Ruth in a later day, to remain faithful to the house of Judah; that, though, is not of any consequence in evaluating Yehuda's behavior. The crucial point in this regard is Yehuda's directing her to do so, fully expecting her to comply with his directive. The contrast between Yehuda's subordination of Tamar to his needs and the deep feeling of gratitude exhibited by Na'omi and Bo'az towards Ruth is a clear illustration of the nature of Yehuda's actions."

The story of Yehuda and Tamar is a story where people turn their backs on their family. People are treated as objects. They are ignored, and therefore abused. Tamar forces Yehuda to own up to his personal responsibility, but he admits it only reluctantly.

Megillat Ruth presents a diametrically opposite image. The leading personalities of Megillat Ruth epitomise caring and selflessness rather than self-interest. Might we suggest that the Book of Ruth deliberately refers to Boaz's ancestor in order to demonstrate that earlier lessons have been learned?

IN CONCLUSION

It certainly strikes me that Ruth and Matan Torah represent an ideal balance. The epic event of Matan Torah represents a national commitment to God and Torah, a Bein Adam LaMakom event par excellence. The book of Ruth is a perfect counterbalance. This is a story of a few private, modest individuals, who also demonstrate absolute commitment. Commitment here is to people, to human dignity, to the values of Bein Adam Lechavero.

A Chag Sameach to you and your families.

Rav Alex

¹ We have focused upon certain Ruth-Shavuot connections that embody the wider spirit of Megillat Ruth. There are however, some further approaches that we shall not examine here. Amongst them:

- The Midrash Zuta sees the connection between Ruth and Shavuot (Matan Torah) in that it "teaches a person that Torah is not granted to a person other than through suffering and poverty."
- A different approach suggests that King David, whose birth is announced in the final verse of the Megilla, died on Shavuot (Ruth Rabba 3:2, and also in Yerushalmi Beitza) hence the Megilla reminds us of David's beginnings.

² See Ruth 1:16. This Gemara works as something of a Midrash to verses 16 and 17 in chapter one, viewing each and every comment of Ruth as a response to an objection raised by Naomi. It is through this intense exchange that Naomi realises the depth of Ruth's passion.

³ This line has always struck me as written with a certain mischievous irony. After all, let us not forget that the entire scene of Chapter 3 in Ruth is when Ruth goes to sleep at Boaz's feet in the granary floor. It is precisely "Yichud", the prohibition of seclusion in a lonely place which Ruth initiates!

⁴ See Shemot 23:16. The harvest is also mentioned in Shemot 34:21,32 and Devarim 16:9. In Shemot 34:22, Devarim 16:10 the festival is referred to as "Shavuot", and in Bamidbar 28:26 it is named "Yom Habikkurim."

⁵ Interestingly, the portrayal of Ruth the Moabite as a woman graced with kindness and modesty represents something of a turnaround in Biblical terms. In the Torah, the Moabites are characterized by their non-hospitality: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendents, even in the tenth generation shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not greet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt. ...never seek their welfare or benefit as long as you live" (Devarim 23:4-7)

⁶ The idea for this analysis can be found in Daat Mikra, pg. 14 of the introduction, and also in Yair Zakovitch's excellent Mikra Leyisrael commentary pg. 26-8.

⁷ The meanings of names take on an important role in Megillat Ruth. See Ruth Rabba 2:5. One of the most obvious name-plays in the book of Ruth can be found explicitly in the text. See 1:20 – "Do not call me Naomi (pleasant) but rather Mara (bitterness)." For an academic study, see the writings of Moshe Garsiel.

⁸ See Ber. 35:18 where Benjamin, born at the moment of his mother's death, is named "Ben Oni" – "On" with the connotation of pain and distress (Rashi) or mourning (Ibn Ezra.)

⁹ Publicised on the VBM Parsha website (www.vbm-torah.org.il) See the archives on Parshat Vayeshev.