



Transformations in the Book of Ruth: A Megillah Companion

Reflections from the Rohr Writing Scholars



Yeshiva University

THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
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Transformation in the Book of Ruth

There are so many crossroads in the Book of Ruth, times when any character in the story could have made a different choice and the outcome for Jewish history would have been different as a result. Changes happen but transformation is a choice. It's the choice Naomi makes to return to her homeland, and the choice that Ruth makes to accompany her and absorb her people, land, and God. It's the choice Orpah makes to turn away from that destiny.

Boaz chooses to notice a young industrious worker in his fields and elevate her status and give her certain advantages. Ruth, who had made so many meritorious and selfless decisions did not believe herself worthy of his kindness: "She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, 'Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?'" (Ruth 2:10).

For all the dramatic transformations that take place in every chapter of Ruth – political instability, famine, death, moving out of city and country, returning, gleaning, marrying, having a child, becoming a grandparent – it is the currency of small kindnesses that ultimately change these characters the most.

Ruth's kindness to her mother-in-law revives Naomi. Naomi's kindness to Ruth helps cement her future. Boaz's kindness to them both gives each woman a sense of the future. The kindness of the townswomen in the last chapter helps provide a supportive female safety net so different from the alienation of the townswomen who ask Naomi if it could possibly be her when she returned from the plains of Moab.

These kindnesses come in different sizes, from generous offers to the small gift of barley that Boaz gave to Ruth after a strange night on the threshing floor – "Hold out the shawl you are wearing.' She held it while he measured out six measures of barley, and he put it on her back'" (Ruth 3: 15). She did not leave broken-hearted or empty-handed.

Boaz needed to signal to her that although the marriage Ruth attempted was unsuccessful, his regard for her was held in every small kernel.

The cover image was painted by Jan Victors in 1653 and titled "Boaz entertains Ruth." This Dutch artist painted many wonderful and evocative biblical scenes. Ruth lowers her eyes and lifts up her arm in gratitude, while most of the others look on at this soon-to-be couple. The food is at the center of the story because it connects Naomi's reason for leaving, Ruth and Naomi's reason to return, the nourishment each is seeking, the open heartedness of Boaz. It suggests the many kindnesses we do when we share food with others. And the story takes place in "the house of bread."

Transformation comes about because of conscious decisions. It is rarely comfortable, often deeply unsettling, and can require brutal honesty about one's prospects or personality. It is hard to evolve into a better version of oneself. And, for those who believe and embody change, it is a never-ending process.

We can ease the difficulties of change by reaching out in big and small ways to those going through a transformation and extending our kindnesses. And when we are in the midst of change, being helpful and generous to others can ease our own burdens. As Rabbi Sacks so eloquently writes in *The Power of Ideas*:

Shavuot is when we celebrate the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. The fact that we read Ruth's story at this time tells us that society cannot be made by laws alone. It needs something more – the unforced, unlegislated kindness that makes us reach out to the lonely and vulnerable, even if we are lonely and vulnerable ourselves. Then and now, society needs the kindness of strangers.

We've picked transformation as a theme for this reader. Through a generous grant from Pamela and George Rohr, five students in Yeshiva University's

undergraduate Honors Leadership Society have been named Rohr Writing Scholars. These are students with different majors entering a variety of fields who each love writing and are exceptional at it. This is the second year of this new pilot and together, we've experimented with essays on culture, Jewish identity, op-eds on important topics, travel writing, and memoir. Two of our

students transferred to Stern from Cooper Union and Barnard, and we are so happy to feature their writing among those of our other three Stern and Yeshiva College students. Each of them has picked a chapter introduced by an opening essay on a major theme in the book.

We hope their writing touches you as it has touched us.

Wishing you a beautiful and transformative Shavuot,

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INTRODUCTION

Kindness Amidst The Whirlwind

Dahlia Bernstein

In the first few verses of the Book of Ruth, Ruth experiences many disruptive life changes: the death of her husband, famine, immigration, and becoming a caretaker for her infirm mother-in-law. These hardships do not leave Ruth unchanged. Rather, the Book of Ruth presents a story of transformation: Ruth evolves from a vulnerable outsider into the courageous matriarch of the Davidic dynasty. As her circumstances shift, Ruth transforms both her identity and the way she expresses kindness.

In her book, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, Dr. Yael Ziegler addresses the development of Ruth's kindness. She argues that at first glance the Book of Ruth lacks "an obvious eternal religious message or overt historical significance." The story is a serene, uneventful account of Naomi returning to Beit Lechem, with her daughter-in-law Ruth in hopes of finding her a husband and some food amidst the famine. Ruth seems to be a story of a mother and daughter-in-law who have fallen on hard times and are actively looking for a solution. This begs the question - why is this narrative worthy of being in Tanakh?

Dr. Ziegler answers this question by highlighting how Ruth's consistent kindness evolves as she does. In chapter one, Ruth selflessly remains with her aging mother-in-law and follows her to a strange land, forgoing marriage prospects and stability. In chapter two, Ruth swallows her pride and gathers discarded grain from the fields to feed herself and her mother-in-law. In chapters one and two, Ruth puts her mother-in-law's needs before her own. This exemplifies Ruth's quiet and passive kindness. In chapter three, Ruth does not hesitate to prostrate herself before Boaz, in hopes of bearing a child and continuing her and Naomi's familial line. In chapter four, the crisis resolves as Ruth bears a child which Naomi cares for as her own. In chapters three and four, Ruth goes out of her way to procure a family line for her and Naomi, channeling a more active type of kindness.

Dr. Ziegler also explains that the Book of Ruth was canonized to trace the origins of *Malchut Beit David* [The Davidic Dynasty]. Throughout Tanakh and the Talmud, there are many examples of how monarchical systems can lead to tyranny, destruction, and dysfunction. The Book of Ruth showcases Ruth and Boaz's selflessness and generosity, making them the perfect progenitors for moral and competent kings.

The true power of the Book of Ruth lies in the intersection of these themes. The Book of Ruth highlights Ruth's evolving kindness to show that despite being a Moabite and a convert, she is worthy of being the mother of the Davidic dynasty. The Book of Ruth affirms that Ruth, kind and empathetic, is fit to be the foremother of our leaders.

I admire Ruth's ability to transform adversity into moral growth. Ruth's kindness, which begins as a passive pursuit, propels her into action by the end of the book. Today, much like Ruth, the Jewish people face a whirlwind of instability with the precarious situation in Israel and the antisemitism faced by Jews globally. I hope that we as the Jewish people can channel Ruth and stay true to our values and apply them to new challenges we encounter.

CHAPTER ONE

Ruth's Move from Background to Foreground

Daniella Taub

In the opening chapter of the Book of Ruth, the story begins with Naomi at its center. She is introduced alongside her husband and sons, and the narrative follows her journey into loss. First her husband dies, then her two sons, leaving her alone and unanchored. Ruth, at this point, is simply one of her daughters-in-law, part of the background of Naomi's life. After the death of the rest of her family, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return home, and Orpah ultimately does. Ruth, however, chooses differently. She stays, and in that decision, something in the story quietly shifts.

That shift becomes clear in verse 16, which opens with Ruth's voice: "*vatomer Rut*" [*And Ruth spoke*]. These are her first words in the Megillah, and they mark a turning point. No longer just Naomi's companion, Ruth begins to step into the center of the narrative. Her declaration, "Where you go, I will go... your people shall be my people, and your God my God", is more than an expression of loyalty. It is a bold act of self-definition. Ruth is choosing a future filled with uncertainty, stepping into a life where she has no status, security, or guarantee of belonging. In this way, Ruth stands in contrast to many women named in the Bible whose voices remain muted or entirely absent from the text, their stories told only through the actions or perspectives of others. Figures like Dinah and Batsheva highlight how often women's voices are minimized in Tanakh. Dinah never speaks at all, her experience mediated entirely through the reactions of her father and brothers. Batsheva, who stands at the center of one of the most well-known scandals involving King David, is given only a few words, with her story largely shaped by the decisions of David and others. The stories of these other female figures make Ruth's clear and defining speech all the more striking by contrast.

Ruth's initiative reshapes not only her own identity, but the direction of the story itself. Power in the Megillah no longer comes from position or background, but from inner strength and moral courage. Ruth, the outsider, becomes the one who moves the narrative forward. Her actions suggest that success and redemption do not begin with grand gestures, but rather with a decision to remain, to commit, and to move forward despite uncertainty.

CHAPTER TWO

The Plans Made and the Lives Lived

Maayan Kahan

The central narrative of the Book of Ruth concerns the poignant relationship between Ruth and Boaz. Through Boaz, Ruth is able to provide for herself and Naomi during the grain harvest and strengthen her connection to the Jewish people, two essential themes of the holiday of Shavuot. Yet, this catalytic relationship occurs seemingly by chance. Naomi is aware of the existence of this wealthy relative, but when it comes to Ruth's individual journey, the verse specifies "וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתָּבוֹא וַתִּלְקֹט בְּשָׂדֵה אַחֲרֵי הַקְצִירִים וַיְקָר מְקוֹרָהּ" וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתָּבוֹא וַתִּלְקֹט בְּשָׂדֵה אַחֲרֵי הַקְצִירִים וַיְקָר מְקוֹרָהּ, "the [Ruth] went and came and gathered in the field behind the harvesters who so happened to be gathering in the field of Boaz." (Ruth 2:3) Ruth's encounter with Boaz is critical not just to the story of the Megillah, but also to the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people with King David, their descendant and the forefather of Moshiach. The beginning of the chapter implies that Naomi was developing a calculated plan to orchestrate the meeting of Ruth and Boaz. Naomi's vision was to change the fate of herself and her daughter-in-law, not by being a passive observer, but by being an active participant in her own destiny. Yet, Naomi plays a very minor role throughout the rest of the chapter, and their meeting is attributed to a מקרה. Ruth goes from a gatherer subsiding off the scraps of others to the wife in an illustrious household all while the engineer of these momentous events goes unnamed. As Jews, it is our responsibility to realize that nothing truly occurs through happenstance. So often we operate through the paradigm of Naomi, in which we strive to plan every detail of our lives. In times of failure, a common exercise is looking to the will of God as an explanation for our shortcomings. As difficult as that may be, it is often more challenging to do so in times of success. As tempting as it is to take full credit when achieving something we have not just desired but actively pursued, we must realize that there is not a single moment in our lives, whether they be trials or triumphs, that has not been touched by the hand of God.

CHAPTER THREE

Who Are You Now? Naomi, Ruth, and the Rejection of Emptiness

David Smigel

Today is a new day. Naomi, having shed her name in favor of one recalling her abandonment at the hands of a God she perceived as cruel following her long wandering without reprieve, finally feels a glimmer of hope. The other morning, Ruth came back to report the first shift in their fortunes since her husband's passing – the kindness of Boaz – and suddenly Naomi can praise God's benevolence again.

After months of dejected hopelessness, of passively accepting her misfortune, she is empowered. She has decided she will secure Ruth a good life for the kindness which Ruth has shown her, kindness she can only fully appreciate now. She will no longer merely survive, but act on the opportunity God has offered her. She will not allow the girl to die alone, nor for either of them to resign to their fate.

Suddenly seeing the Hand which has preserved them through their travails, Naomi resolves to cling to it, not to let the opportunity delivered through Boaz pass. After Ruth attended to her all this time, now Naomi will help her. She devises a plan and directs Ruth not to delay, to prepare herself and pursue Boaz.

The shift was undeniably contagious. Ruth, who one chapter earlier spoke to Boaz with subservience that mirrored her defeated mother-in-law, finds her own voice. The Ruth of yesterday shrank before Boaz's favor as an unentitled outsider, but now she asserts, "Spread your robe over me, for you will be my redeemer." Ruth takes charge, showing immense initiative to carry out what Boaz correctly identifies as a great chessed [kindness].

Both Boaz and Naomi face this unrecognizable Ruth with the same question, "מי את?" "Who are you," or perhaps more aptly, "who have you become? Who are you *now*?" She responds to Naomi that she returned no longer empty-handed, or translating more literally, no longer empty.

In taking charge and investing proper *hishtadlut* [active effort], Ruth finds herself more filled than she has since being widowed, and earns her identity in the narrative and merits her legacy recounted in the concluding chapter. In defying despair, both Naomi and Ruth choose not to be passive spectators of their lives, but people who recognize when God sends them a way forward and grasp the Hand that offers it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Echoes of Leadership

Arlette Anteby

While the central narrative of the Book of Ruth concludes with the naming of Ruth's son, Oved, the event is immediately followed by five verses, which trace the lineage from Peretz, the son of Judah and Tamar, to King David. These verses, which initially seem like an addendum, ultimately serve to emphasize the way that the Megillah acts as a development of the story of Judah and Tamar. Following in Tamar's footsteps, Ruth consistently chooses to take bold and calculated action. Despite living on the fringes of society, she works to advocate for herself, initiate a relationship with Boaz, and redirect both her own and Naomi's future. In parallel, Boaz, like Judah, remains passive and largely oblivious. This dynamic for Ruth and Boaz, however, is reversed in the final chapter of the Megillah when Boaz decides to voluntarily assume responsibility for the redemption of the houses of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion. While Judah also eventually takes accountability for his inaction by admitting "צדקה ממני" (Gen. 38:26), his acceptance that he should have assumed responsibility for Tamar comes only after being confronted with his failure. One might argue that we can question Boaz, who is spurred to action by Ruth, in a similar fashion. However, it is Boaz's decision to publicly declare, "אתם עדים היום כי קניתי את כל אשר לאלימלך" (Ruth 4:9), that distinguishes him from Judah. While Ruth does open Boaz's eyes by approaching him on the threshing floor, her words, "פרש כנפך על אמתך" (Ruth 3:9), function as an invitation. Boaz independently chooses to act in response to this invitation, not by means of deception, shame, or coercion. In a moment that mirrors the ambiguity and potential for exploitation present in the story of Judah and Tamar, Boaz's response is defined by restraint. Boaz, unlike Judah, exercises control over his power. Rather than taking advantage of Ruth's vulnerability, he preserves her dignity and ensures that the encounter leads to a public, legally binding commitment unlike Judah's decision to engage with Tamar followed by his reactive admission of failure. This transformation ultimately positions Boaz as a tikkun for Judah's failed leadership, redefining what it means to be a member of the tribe of Judah and enabling the birth of Oved and his grandson, King David. Embodying Ruth's bold initiative, David, not initially positioned as a warrior, volunteers to face Goliath. His immediate, undefensive, and public response of "הטאתי לה" when confronted by Nathan after his sin with Batsheva is a direct echo of Boaz's action. The final verses are not merely an addendum, but the natural conclusion of this transformation. They trace the emergence of a model of leadership rooted in both initiative and accountability, the very model that ultimately prepares David for kingship.