THE ROMANCE OF RUTH, THE RUSE OF BOAZ, AND THE *GO'EL*'S REAL FEAR

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According to Deuteronomy 25:5, if a man dies without issue, it is the responsibility of his oldest surviving sibling – or the next in age if the older brother or brothers refuse to do so - to perform a 'levirate marriage,' or *Yibbum*, namely, to take to wife and support the widow: *If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not be married abroad unto one not of his kin; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And it shall be that the firstborn that she bears shall succeed in the name* (yakum al shem*) of his brother that is dead, that his name be not blotted out of Israel.*

The Talmud states that the phrase *yakum al shem* means *yakum lenahalah* ('shall succeed to the inheritance') but does not imply that the first child born to the sister-in-law shall, literally, be given the same name as the deceased.[1] This inference is made by a *gezerah shavah* deduction from the verse, *they shall be called after the name* (al shem) *of their brethren in their inheritance* (benahalatam) (Gen. 48:6), whereby the descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh were to be granted an equal tribal inheritance but did not bear the names of their primogenitors.

It is difficult to establish the precise relationship of either Boaz or the nameless *go'el* to Naomi's husband, the deceased Elimelekh. This is on account of some of the familial terms being used imprecisely. Thus, while the narrator initially refers to Boaz as *moda* (ktiv: *m'yuda'*) *l'ishahh* - which means no more than *an acquaintance*[2] *of her* (Naomi's) *husband* – he adds the inconsistent gloss, *of the family of Elimelekh* (2:1). This gloss might well have been added to counter any suggestion that, in order to displace the *go'el*, Boaz told him that the duty of performing levirate marriage would devolve

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upon him in addition to a mere redemption of the field. That this was the objective of the gloss would also explain why it is repeated, for added emphasis, but two verses later.

When Boaz first meets Ruth and issues firm instructions to his reapers to protect her and supply her with all the grain gleanings she required - treatment that elicits from her the direct question, ''*Why have I found such favour in your sight that you should be so concerned for me, a foreigner?''* (2:10) – his reply is highly significant. He does not say, as expected, ''because we are family!'', but refers to the fact that he had been greatly impressed with how she had coped with adversity, with the concern she had shown towards her mother-in-law, and with how she had left her home to join another people and embrace another faith. Although Naomi - in her attempt to instil confidence into Ruth to pursue a relationship with Boaz - describes him to her, in one breath (2:20), as 'one related to us (*karov*)'[3] and 'one of our redeeming kinsmen (*mi-go'alenu*)', the reaction of Boaz was clearly not motivated by any family sentiment – which he clearly did not feel - but by his feelings for Ruth.

It is this romantic consideration that provides an extra literary and conceptual link between the reading of Shir ha-Shirim on Pesach and the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. Both books fuse the spiritual with the romantic. Shir ha-Shirim, as viewed through the Midrashic allegorical prism,[4] depicts the reciprocal love of God and Israel, as reflected in the courtship of the shepherd and the Shunammite girl, as well as the challenges and obstacles that are placed in the path of that union, as represented by the characters of the king, the daughters of Jerusalem, and the watchmen of the city.

An example of this fusion of the spiritual and the romantic is provided by the Midrashic treatment of the verse, *I am black and beautiful* (Shir ha-Shirim 1:5), which attempts to explain how Israel could possibly synthesize those two antithetical attributes: 'black' - as a metaphor for the darkness that symbolised the absence of divine light or grace – and 'beautiful', a superlative, reflecting a lover bathed in (divine) love and grace:

"I AM BLACK: in respect of my deeds'; AND BEAUTIFUL: in respect of the deeds of my ancestors. I AM BLACK: in Egypt, when Israel rebelled against Me and would not obey me; AND BEAUTIFUL: in Egypt, when she wallowed in the blood of the Paschal Lamb and the blood of circumcision. I

AM BLACK: at the Red Sea, when the Israelites were hesitant to proceed, and unsure of God's redemptive powers; AND BEAUTIFUL: at the Red Sea, when they sang, *This is my God and I shall glorify Him*. I AM BLACK: at Horeb, where they made the Golden Calf; AND BEAUTIFUL: at Horeb, when they affirmed, ''W*e shall do and we shall obey*.'' I AM BLACK: all the days of the week; AND BEAUTIFUL: on the Sabbath."[5]

The book of Ruth may similarly be viewed through the prisms of romance and allegory. Ruth - like the Shunammite in her pursuit of love - must overcome many obstacles in her desire to achieve union with Judaism, notably bereavement, poverty, and estrangement from homeland, family, and religion. The romance is expressed in the determined way that Boaz woos her and in his persistence to keep her close: instructing her to glean only in his fields and fraternise only with his female employees (2:8), instructing his lads to help her in every way and never to obstruct or pester her (2:9, 16), spreading his robe over her as an indication of his wish to make her his wife (3:8-9), and in the way he contrives to displace the *go'el* in order to become her redeemer. But, more boldly and controversially, in his pursuit of forbidden love for a non-Jewess, a motif that runs as a thread through the book, triggered by the previous relationships of Mahlon and Orpah, and Kilyon and Ruth. And, finally, in the reciprocal love of Naomi and Ruth, her non-Jewish daughter-in-law, which sustains the atmosphere of the entire narrative. Both books seek to confirm the adage that 'the course of true love never did run smooth,' *which* applies equally to the true love of God, of which Ruth was a prime exemplar.

It is particularly significant that the book of Ruth studiously avoids disclosing the precise relationship of either Boaz or the *go'el* (the one at the nearest relationship and consequently with the first duty to act as 'redeemer' of the field) to Elimelekh, thus confirming our view that neither of them were biblically mandated to perform the duty of *yibbum*, given that the Torah refers specifically to 'brothers', a term that recurs three times within the two verses that formulate the Deuteronomic law. The book's vague reference to their relationship to Naomi is given as that of *m'yuda* (ktiv) *l'isha*, 'an acquaintance of her husband' and *mi-mishpaḥat Elimelekh*, 'a member of Elimelekh's family' (2:1).

That the relationship was distant may also be inferred from the fact that the name Boaz – which she would have heard on the lips of his workers on her first visit to glean at his field – had clearly meant nothing to her. For, when she returned home that night, she told Naomi that the name of the owner of the field was Boaz (2:19). She did not say that she had met the family relative that Naomi had previously mentioned to her! Indeed, it was only then that Naomi revealed to her the connection to him. It is surely inconceivable, however, that, on their journey back from Moab to Canaan, a destitute Naomi would not have mentioned to her companion daughter-in-law the existence of a close relative to whom they might turn for hospitality, protection and support. Naomi would assuredly have mentioned to Ruth the name of Boaz had the relationship been at all close!

Finally, the repeated Pentateuchal reference to 'brother' suggests that the levirate obligation devolved only upon a member of the same generation as that of the deceased. The reference to Boaz, however, as a *m'yuda* of Elimelekh suggests someone of the latter's generation.

As the biblical law provides the get-out ritual of *halitzah* (Deut. 25:7-10), even for a brother of the deceased, there was accordingly no reason for Boaz to dupe the *go'el* into thinking that he had the responsibility of levirate marriage in addition to that of redeeming the field, or, indeed, to pursue the former duty himself. It is noteworthy that, initially, Boaz only mentions to him his financial responsibility to redeem the field (4:3-4) but makes no mention of the added duty of marrying Ruth until after he'd heard the *go'el*'s affirmative response, *eg'al*, *'I'll redeem it'* (v.4). This begs the question of what specific aspect of *yibbum* the *go'el* found unacceptable, given that the explanation he gives to Boaz, *I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate* (v.6), is left vague. We would argue that there is more to it than the commonly held explanation that he felt unable to take on the extra responsibility of a second wife and the burden of having to support future offspring.

We infer this from the import of Boaz's next, syntactically awkward, assertion: *On the day you acquire the field from Naomi, you will* [effectively] *be acquiring it also from Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the deceased* (ume'et Rut ha-mo'aviah eshet ha-met kanita), so *as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate* (v.5).

Boaz is making the point that the acquired field will constitute a permanent memorial to the name of the deceased with which it was hitherto associated, reinforcing the latter's original claim to that parcel of ancestral land. Significantly, it is only when he hears that particular association that the *go'el* changes his mind and articulates his fear, *that I will bring my inheritance into disrepute* (v.6).

Rashi's explanation of the latter phrase is worthy of consideration:

['My inheritance' means] 'my children,' as in the verse, *The **inheritance** of the Lord is **children*** (Ps. *127:3*). [So, the sense is that] I would thereby be attaching a stigma to my offspring [by publicizing their defiance of the biblical verse which states], *Neither an Ammonite nor a Moabite may enter into the community of the Lord* (Deut. 23:4). He [the *goe'l*] displayed ignorance, however, of the [Oral Law's] interpretation which excluded only 'an Ammonite or Moabite' – that is, a male descendant — but not a female."[6]

Accordingly, the *go'el*'s dilemma was not marital or domestic – namely, that an additional wife and children sharing in his estate would mean less for his present children - but, purely and simply, xenophobic, the fear that his existing children would be tainted in the eyes of the community through their father's marriage to a Moabitess.

Boaz had subtly planted that thought into the *goel*'s mind by borrowing - with a pejorative emphasis, no doubt – the term *Ruth, the Moabitess* (4:5), which description was originally coined by the overseer of the reapers when Boaz had questioned him regarding Ruth's identity (see 2:6). Boaz sought to make the act of redemption even less attractive to the *go'el* by dressing it up in a direct reference to the Pentateuchal verse, emphasizing the fact that the objective of the Levirate marriage was *to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance* (see Deut. 25:6). In the Pentateuchal context, the deceased would have been a member of the *go'el*'s family and tribe, and the act of 'redemption' would consequently accrue to the restoration of tribal land and unity. In our context, however, that reference could only serve to deter the *go'el* by intimating that he would be bringing his family into disrepute, since, 'perpetuating the name' of one who had intermarried would hardly accrue to a family's reputation in the eyes of his community!

It is unlikely, however, that the Oral Law's institution (*takkanah*) of *Mo'avi v'lo Mo'aviah* was already operative by the period of the Judges when the

go'el was considering his position. It smacks rather of a much later justification of the situation, intended to purify King David's ancestral line. Had it been in place at the time, there would assuredly have been an echo of it in the book of Ruth which otherwise has no hesitation in reflecting Deuteronomic law. There is also the consideration of the fact that, for any family that availed itself of that loop-hole, in order to welcome a Moabite woman, there was no guarantee that its action would have been accepted with equanimity by the local Israelite community. It is more probable that the usual prejudiced attitudes to 'sleeping with the enemy' would have obtained, and that more than a tincture of ignominy would have attached to the memory of Elimelekh's offspring for that reason. Hence our approbation of Rashi's view that it was precisely that taint of association with a Moabite woman that the *go'el* found unacceptable.

Boaz, however, had no such qualms. Perhaps as a large landowner and employer of numerous *kotzrim* (harvest-time workers from the various surrounding tribes and areas), he was far more open-minded on the subject. He had fallen in love with Ruth and had no issue with attaching to his estates a field that would be associated in the minds of the Judaean locals with the intermarried offspring of Elimelekh, just as he, himself, had no issue with marrying 'Ruth the Moabitess.' Ruth is a story of *amor vincit Omnia*, and, from that perspective, as the background story to Shavu'ot, it provides another point of contact with Song of Songs, the love story of Pesach.

The wording of Boaz's first invitation to the *goe'l* to redeem the field, made in the presence of the ten elders (4:3-4), and his subsequent repetition to those elders of the arrangement the two had just entered into (vv.9-10) - to which they were, again, witness (v.10) – is significant. It is of a man sending a clear and bold message to both the leaders and the ordinary members of his community[7] that not only would he not tolerate any future tittle tattle regarding the status of his marriage to Ruth, or, indeed, regarding her previously unauthorised right to be considered a beneficiary of the property of the deceased Elimelekh's family, but that, to the contrary, he expected them all to recognise a Moabite convert as possessing the full rights of a home-born Jewess. This was reinforced through his telling repetition of the term 'Ruth the Moabitess' (vv. 5 and 10) and his insistence that 'they be all witnesses' (vv.9, 10) to this conversion.

Boaz's forcefulness and influence had the desired effect: All the people assembled at the gates; the elders affirmed that they were witnesses (v.11); and Ruth was pronounced not only of Israelite pedigree, but of matriarchal status (*ibid*.).

NOTES

1. See TB *Yevamot* 24a.

2. Although most translations render the Hebrew *moda* as 'kinsman', I have argued here – on the basis of the original consonantal reading (ketiv), *m'yuda* - for the sense of 'acquaintance.' Aside from the fact that the root *y-d-'* means, unequivocally, 'to know, be acquainted with,' the form *m'yuda* in Mishnaic Hebrew conveys the notion of 'friend, acquaintance' with no suggestion of kinship. This occurs, for example, in Mishnah *Avot* 6:3 (*alufo um'yuda'o*), in the strict sense of 'close friend' (See M. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 565b), a nuance that is clarified in that Mishnah's citation of Psalm 55:14 where the identical phrase occurs, and where the universal translation of the word *m'yuda'i* is 'my friend,' as contextually indicated! It is highly unlikely that a simple and popular term like *m'yuda'* would have undergone such a change in meaning - from 'close relative' to, merely, 'friend' or 'acquaintance' - in the period between biblical and Mishnaic times; and hence our argument for the latter sense.

3. Consistent with the thrust of our previous note, we do not invest the term *karov* (JPS rendering: 'one related to us') here with the sense of one so closely related as to bear the responsibility of a *levir*. In the rebellion against King David, the tribe of Judah explain their loyalty to him, saying, *ki karov ha-melekh elai* (II Sam. 19:43). Their relationship to the king was clearly tribal not familial. Similarly, *am kerovo* (Psalm 148:14), descriptive of God's relationship to Israel, *et al*.

4. See Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:5; TB *Meggillah* 7a.

5. Midrash *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:35; See Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other* (London & New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

6. See Rashi on 4:6.

7. See opening words of v.9: *Vayyomer Bo'az lazkenim v'khol ha'am.*