



“And It Was in the Days of the Judging of the Judges” The Problem of Leadership¹

The initial verse of the book of Ruth draws our attention to the book’s negative setting. Its inaugural word, *vayehi* (an onomatopoeic word that sounds like a lament),² tends to introduce a calamity.³ This phrase is immediately followed by a second *vayehi*, introducing a famine, which is also a dependable indicator of Divine displeasure and Israel’s disobedience.⁴

The full phrase *vayehi bimay* (and it was in the days of) may further hint at the adverse setting of the book, drawing our attention to the absence of monarchy. This exact phrase appears four additional times in Tanach,⁵ always prefacing a negative time-period. However, in every other case, the phrase *vayehi bimay* precedes the introduction of a king. The replacement of a king with this vague judging of the judges highlights the absence of monarchic leadership, a key factor that foments chaos during this period.⁶

Who are these judges and whom are they judging? Commenting on the double language, the Gemara (Bava Batra 15b) treats the noun as the object of the infinitive, suggesting that the judges are being judged by the people. This is both a comment on the rebelliousness of the people, who do not accept the judges’ authority, and a negative assessment of the judges, who deserve judgment. The Gemara characterizes the judges in the following anecdote: a judge reprimands a supplicant with an idiom intended to direct him to cease his

sinning, “Take out the splinter from between your teeth!” The litigant’s insolent response, “Take out the beam from between your eyes,” is a reference to more egregious sins committed by the judge himself. The society depicted by this interpretive reading is chaotic, lacking a viable judicial infrastructure. Not only do the people disrespect the judges, refusing to heed their instructions, but the judges themselves are not worthy of respect!

Ibn Ezra offers a similar reading, but with a twist. He posits that the double language indicates that G-d judged the judges at this time, and it was due to the poor conduct of the judges that G-d brought a famine upon the land. Ibn Ezra’s approach has a syntactical advantage, in that he explains the connection between the opening phrase, “And it was in the days of the judging of the judges,” and the next sentence, “And there was a famine in the land.” Moreover, he provides a theological justification for the famine, which is introduced in the narrative with no causal explanation.

Malbim addresses the vague description of the time-period. He maintains that during the period of the Book of Ruth, there is no central leadership. Instead, this is a period between the authoritative judges, when anyone who wished to rule seized control, and unauthorized judges proliferated throughout the land, doing as they pleased. As we know from the end of the Book of Judges, lack of central leadership generates chaos, the collapse of the religious and social

order. Malbim thereby resolves the question of the vague description of the time-period and simultaneously depicts this era’s social turmoil.

This opening verse focuses our attention on the problem of leadership at the opening of the Book of Ruth. The backdrop of this book recalls the chaotic leadership of the end of the period of the judges, which lacks monarchy. The solution for this era appears at the end of the Book of Ruth, which concludes with the birth of David, the founder of a dynasty of Judean kings.

1 This essay has been adapted (with permission from the publisher) from Yael Ziegler, *From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015).

2 This word seems to comprise two expressions of moaning: *vai* and *hee* (commensurate with the better-known expression “*oy vey*”).

3 Megillah 10b; Ruth Rabbah, *Petichta* 7; Genesis Rabbah 42:3; Leviticus Rabbah 11:7; Esther Rabbah, *Petichta* 11.

4 See, e.g., Leviticus 26:18–20; Deuteronomy 11:16–17. The *Targum* on Ruth 1:1 notes explicitly that this famine is a punishment.

5 Genesis 14:1; Isaiah 7:1; Jeremiah 1:3; Esther 1:1. A Midrash displays its customary literary sensitivity by noting that all five of these verses have this opening in common (Ruth Rabbah, *Petichta* 7).

6 Note the refrain that bemoans the absence of monarchy in the final tumultuous chapters of the book of Judges (17:6, 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).