



# GUIDED LEARNING



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## The First Verse of Ruth through the Eyes of Chazal

In this guided learning, we will explore the time period of Megillat Rut

The Megillah's opening sentence generates two primary questions:

And it was in the days of the judging of the judges, and there was a famine in the land (Ruth 1:1).

Linguistically, many exegetes focus on the double language in the verse. Why not simply write, "And it was in the days of the judges?" The second question relates to the vague description of the time-period, in which no specific judge is mentioned.

The Gemara (Bava Batra 15b) addresses the linguistic question:

וְאָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מֵאֵי דְקָתִיב וַיְהִי בַיָּמֵי שְׁפֹטֵי הַשּׁוֹפְטִים דּוֹר שְׁשׁוּפֵט אֶת שׁוֹפְטָיו  
Rabbi Yochanan says: What is the meaning of that which is written: "And it happened in the days of the judging of the judges" (Ruth 1:1)? This indicates a generation that judged its judges.

In other words, the Gemara characterizes this generation as one in which the people render judgment upon their judges. This is both a comment on the rebelliousness of the people, who do not accept the authority of the judges, as well as on the quality of the judges themselves.

The society depicted by this exegetical reading is chaotic, lacking any 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!

By viewing the first sentence of the book as a direct reference to the problem of leadership during this period, the Gemara focuses our attention on the manner in which Megillat Ruth presents the problems of this period in its opening. The backdrop of Megillat Ruth is the chaotic leadership of the period of the Judges.

▶ Read Shoftim 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25. What phrase repeats itself throughout the book?

Megillat Ruth concludes with the birth of David, an exemplary leader and the founder of a dynasty of leaders:

Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

▶ Based on what we've seen, how does the conclusion of

the Megillah serve as a solution to its opening, laying the foundations for repair?

Let us now address the factual question. The Midrash in Rut Rabbah 1:1 says:

"And it was in the days of the judging of the judges." And who were they?

Rav says: They were Barak and Devorah.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: They were Shamgar and Ehud.

Rabbi Huna says: They were Devorah, Barak, and Yael. *Shofot* [would have implied] one, *Shoftim* [would have implied] two, *haShoftim* [implies] three.

וַיְהִי בַיָּמֵי שֵׁשׁ שְׁפֹטֵי הַשְּׁפֹטִים וְיָמֵי הַיּוֹדֵם רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֹוי אָמַר: שְׁמַגָּר (וְאַהוּד הָיוּ. רַב הוֹנָא אָמַר: דְּבוּרָה וּבְרַק וַיַּעַל הָיוּ. שֵׁשׁ הָיוּ, שְׁפֹטִים תְּרִין, הַשְּׁפֹטִים תְּלָתָא)

This Midrash records three opinions as to the identity of the Judges during the period of the book of Ruth. Each of the opinions is based on the premise that the plural form of the word "judges," *השופטים*, designates a period in which multiple judges ruled simultaneously.

Let's examine each opinion in the Midrash.

### EHUD AND SHAMGAR

The Gemara writes (Nazir 23b):

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינְיָא רוּת בַּת בְּנוֹ שֶׁל עֶגְלוֹן מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב הָיְתָה  
Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: Ruth was the daughter of the son of Eglon, king of Moab.

▶ Read Shoftim 3:12-30. How does Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's opinion in the Midrash cohere with Rabbi Yosei's in the Gemara? Might this account for Elimelech's choice to journey to Moav during the famine? Might this explain the wariness of the inhabitants of Beit Lechem to accept a Moabite into their midst?

▶ Read Shoftim 30:15. Which tribe was Ehud from? Note that Ehud appears to be the first judge who is not from tribe of Yehuda in the book of Judges (assuming that Otniel is from the tribe of Yehuda; see Shoftim 1:13). Read Shoftim 1:1 and Ruth 1:1. Why is it significant that Megillat Ruth takes place at the time that Ehud becomes the leader? How does this connect to the conclusion of Megillat Ruth?

## DEVORAH AND BARAK

► Read Shoftim chapters 4-5. What thematic similarities can be found between the story of Devorah and Yael and the story of Ruth? How can they be contrasted?

Several linguistic similarities support the comparison between these two stories:

1. The verb *hum*: murmur, roar, tumult, to cause confusion.

a) Devorah: The denouement of the battle against Sisera is described as follows (Shoftim 4:15):

And G-d confused (ויהם) Sisera.

b) Ruth: This same word appears in Megillat Rut to describe the atmosphere of bewilderment and excitement that accompanies Naomi's return to Beit Lechem (Ruth 1:19):

And the entire city was confused (ותהם) upon them.

2. The command, *sura* (turn aside), followed by the immediate obedience to the command, *vaYasar*.

a) Devorah: Yael instructs Sisera to turn aside in order to enter her tent (Shoftim 4:18):

And Yael went out to greet Sisera. And she said to him, "Turn aside (סוררה) my master, turn aside (סוררה) to me, do not be afraid." And he turned aside (ויסר) to the tent and she covered him with a blanket.

b) Ruth: Boaz directs the *goel* to turn aside and sit at the gate in search of a buyer for Naomi's land and a husband for Ruth (Ruth 4:1):

And Boaz went up the gate and he sat there. And behold the *goel* is passing about whom Boaz had spoken. And he said, "Turn aside (סוררה), sit here *Ploni Almoni*." And he turned aside (ויסר) and he sat.

3. The adverb *lat* or *balat*: stealthily, secretly, gently.

a) Devorah: Yael approaches Sisera surreptitiously, exercising extreme caution (Shoftim 4:21):

And she came upon him stealthily (בלאט), and she drove the tent pin into his temple.

b) Ruth: Ruth is likewise silent as she approaches a sleeping Boaz (Ruth 3:7, 9):

And she came stealthily (ולאט) and she uncovered his feet.

4. The doubling of the verb *lech*: where you go, I will go.

Informing Barak that G-d has commanded him to fight

the enemy, Devorah assures him of certain victory. But Barak disregards Devorah's authority and compelling Divine promise and responds by appending specific preconditions for accepting the assignment:

And he said to her, "If you come (אם תלכי) with me I will go, but if you do not come (ויאם לא תלכי) with me, I will not go (לא אלך)" (Shoftim 4:8).

► What can we learn by comparing and contrasting Barak's statement: "If you do not come with me, I will not go!" with Ruth's "Wherever you go, I will go"?

The difference between Ruth and Barak underscores the broader difference between the book of Shoftim and the book of Ruth. The story of Devorah bespeaks commotion, war and death, while the Ruth narrative depicts reunion, marriage and continuity. The book of Shoftim tends to feature characters who are not fully committed to society and whose primary loyalty is to themselves and to the promotion of their own interests. Megillat Rut, on the other hand, tells the story of an extraordinary person who displays unhesitating loyalty, even when it undermines her own personal interest. The story of equivocal loyalties and selfishness portrays a society wracked by war, unrest and troubled social relations. The book of Ruth, in contrast, takes place on a backdrop of kindness, selflessness and devotion, producing a society that is tranquil, cohesive and viable.

## BOAZ AND IVTZAN

Another Midrash attempts to establish the precise time period during which Megillat Rut took place:

Rabba bar R. Huna said in the name of Rav: Ivtzan is Boaz (Bava Batra 91a).

To fully understand this Midrash and its consequences for understanding Boaz, we must examine the Biblical portrayal of Ivtzan.

► Read Shoftim 12:8-10. On what basis does the Gemara identify Ivtzan with Boaz? How does identifying Boaz with Ivtzan suggest that Boaz's intention in marrying Ruth is completely selfless?

How can Ivtzan's behavior be contrasted with that of the *goel* in Ruth 4:6?

## CONCLUSION

Megillat Rut's deliberately vague time frame indicates that any attempt to date the book definitively is at odds with the objective of the book itself, which presents Ruth as the solution to the entire era. Nevertheless, the suggestions found in the *midrashim* enrich our understanding of the goals of the book of Ruth. These *midrashim* draw our attention to the similarities and differences between the book of Ruth and certain narratives in the book of Shoftim. By contrasting and comparing these stories, we emerge with new perspectives and valuable insights into the book of Ruth, its characters, values and messages.