

SHABUOT READER

THE BOOK OF RUTH, TORAH READINGS AND PSALM 68

**WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION,
LAWS AND COMMENTARIES**



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Shabuot Reader

Second Edition

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Halakhot of Yom Tob

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

I. Overview

The Torah prescribes six days of *yamim tobim* (“good days,” festivals) in the course of a year:

- * The first day of Pesah, Nissan 15
- * The seventh day of Pesah, Nissan 21
- * Shabu`ot, Sivan 6
- * Rosh Hashanah, Tishri 1
- * The first day of Sukkot, Tishri 15
- * Shemini Asseret, the eighth day from the first day of Sukkot, Tishri 22.

Yom Kippur (Tishri 10) is not counted amongst *yamim tobim* as it is not a celebratory day.

Each yom tob commemorates and celebrates a different feature of the nation of Israel’s history and its relationship with G-d. Pesah commemorates G-d’s redemption of the Israelites from bondage and the Exodus from Egypt; Shabu`ot corresponds with G-d’s revelation on Mount Sinai and establishment of the Covenant between Him and Israel; Rosh Hashanah (beginning of the new year) marks Divine kingship and human accountability; Sukkot recalls G-d’s protection and providence over Israel.

In the Diaspora there are twelve *yamim tobim* each year: the first two and last two days of Pesah, two days of Shabu`ot, two days of Rosh Hashanah, the first two days of Sukkot and two days of Shemini Asseret.

The reason each yom tob is celebrated for two days in the Diaspora follows. In Mishnaic times the Israelites did not use a fixed calendar; rather, the *bet din hagadol* (the High Court) awaited witnesses to testify that they saw the new moon and then declared *rosh hodesh* (the advent of the new month) accordingly. In this manner the dates for the

upcoming festivals were set. In lands outside Israel there often was a doubt as to which of two possible days was declared the first of the month. This problem was a result of the fact that the lunar cycle is always approximately 29 1/2 days and it was possible that the first of the month could have been established on either of two possible days. (If witnesses did not arrive when expected, rosh hodesh was declared on the next day.) Because of the limited communications of the times, the doubt outside Israel was not always resolved by the time the festival arrived; in order to preserve the sanctity of the festivals, two days were observed for each.

In later Talmudic times, when a fixed calendar was used and there was no doubt as to when the first of the month occurred, the two day observance was retained out of concern that things may return to their previous state. Although modern communications renders the problem of the doubt inconceivable, legislation that was decreed by the High Court (Sanhedrin) cannot be annulled without the reconvening of another High Court, which has not been done these many centuries. Hopefully, we will merit its speedy reestablishment.

II. Prohibited and Permitted Work and Activities

Work and activities that are prohibited on Shabbat, whether from the Torah or by rabbinic enactment, are prohibited on yom tob, with certain major exceptions. Thus, writing, building, shearing, sewing, weaving, buying and selling, etc., are prohibited. However, the Torah permitted work of *okhel nefesh* on yom tob, that is, work that is performed for the purpose of eating on the day. Thus, kneading, baking, cooking, slaughtering and salting meat, are permitted.

Actions that are part of the overall system of *okhel nefesh*, but which are not generally done for the purpose of

eating on the day they are performed – such as harvesting, threshing, grinding and hunting – are prohibited.

Using fire and carrying from domain to domain are permitted. Since these are so pervasively intertwined with *okhel nefesh* they are permitted in and of themselves, even if not specifically done for eating, provided they are done for some benefit that will be derived during the day. Thus, heating water (opening the hot water faucet) to wash one's face, arms and legs is permitted. Heating water to wash the whole body at once, such as in the case of a shower, involves a technical question and should be limited to the second day only (when it is not Shabbat).

Generating a new fire, however, is prohibited, even if done for the purpose of preparing food. The permissibility of using fire requires a pre-existing fire. This halakha is clear from the Talmud, Rambam and Shulhan Arukh. Rishon Lesion Hakham Obadiah Yosef writes that this prohibition includes striking a match. He acknowledges that several rabbis of stature in recent past generations considered a match as equivalent to extending a fire as it was deemed to contain fire in its tip. However, he states that this is not the view of the overwhelming majority of leading rabbis and that those accustomed to striking matches on yom tob should discontinue doing so.

One may turn on a gas range that has a pilot light as this does not involve generating a new fire but extending an extant fire. Many new gas ranges create a new fire when turned on and are the equivalent of striking a match, thus necessitating leaving a small flame on from before yom tob if one is interested in using it on the festival. If a non-Jewish housekeeper kindles a gas range for her personal use, she may be asked to leave it on.

Wheeling a carriage, playing ball and roller skating are permitted on yom tob. Of course, if something breaks it is prohibited to repair it on yom tob.

Muqseh applies to yom tob as to Shabbat; thus, although carrying is permitted on yom tob, carrying money or moving it, etc., is prohibited.

Cooking on one day of yom tob for the next day, whether the next day is a weekday, another yom tob or Shabbat, is prohibited. This applies to all permissible *melakhot* of yom tob. However, it is permitted to cook during the day for the upcoming evening meal if the meal will be started before nightfall. (This is common on Shabu'ot when many congregations pray arbit of the second day early.) It is also permitted to cook dishes that children may partake of before sundown even if the majority of those dishes will be served at night.

When yom tob falls out on Friday, it is necessary to prepare an *erub tabshilin* from before yom tob to permit cooking on Friday for Shabbat. The erub, comprising a cooked item such as a hard-boiled egg, and customarily a baked item such as a loaf of bread or matzah, is designated to be part of the Shabbat meal; thus, preparation for the Shabbat meal is considered to have begun before the onset of yom tob and in such a case the rabbis did not apply their prohibition of preparing for Shabbat. A berakha "*Al Misvat Erub*" is recited. The erub should not be eaten before Shabbat, and surely not before the conclusion of cooking on Friday for Shabbat; preferably, it should be part of the Shabbat meals, making *hamosi* on the loaf of bread. When yom tob falls on Thursday and Friday, the erub only permits cooking on Friday for Shabbat.

Although today we use a fixed calendar and know that the first day of yom tob is the actual day of the festival according to the Torah and the second day is from rabbinical enactment, both days are treated equally except for the following few exceptions:

1. It is permitted to engage in burying the dead on the second day, performing all the work that is necessary.

2. The rabbinic prohibitions associated with *refu'ah* (therapeutic practices and medications) that are applicable on Shabbat for someone who is not in a life-threatening condition do not apply to the second day of yom tob.
3. In accordance with the famous rule that governs doubtful issues in halakha, doubts in halakha concerning matters of the first day are generally resolved strictly while those of the second day are resolved leniently.

The first two exceptions do not apply to the two days of Rosh Hashanah.

III. Candle Lighting, Qiddush and Habdalah

Candles (or oil lamps) are lit for yom tob, customarily by the woman of the home just as is the case for Shabbat; the berakha is '*Lehadlik Ner Shel Yom Tob.*' *Sheheheyanu* should generally not be recited with candle-lighting as it is expected to be recited in *qiddush*.

The evening *qiddush* of yom tob begins with the berakha on wine, followed by a berakha that includes mention of the particular festival. If it is also Shabbat, the wording of the festival *qiddush* is recited with the mention of Shabbat included. Except for the last two nights of Pesah (which do not commemorate a "newly arrived" festival), *sheheheyanu* is also recited in the *qiddush*. On Sukkot, if one is eating in a sukkah, the blessing of *Lesheb BaSukkah* is attached to the *qiddush*.

When the festival falls on Saturday night, *qiddush* includes habdalah (in such a case making a distinction between "holy" and "less-holy"). The first two berakhot are recited as usual for the festival, followed by the berakha for fire (on a candle or an oil lamp). Then the berakha of habdalah is recited. If it is a yom tob that requires *sheheheyanu*, it is recited fifth. Fragrant spices are not included in habdalah on a festival.

At the conclusion of yom tob, even between yom tob and hol hamo'ed (the intermediate days of Pesah and Sukkot), habdalah on wine is recited except when Shabbat immediately follows the conclusion of yom tob. In the latter case, only the standard Friday night *qiddush* is recited, for it would be inappropriate to mention the "departure" of yom tob in the *qiddush* for Shabbat. In the habdalah at the conclusion of yom tob only two berakhot are recited - on wine and the standard habdalah berakha that is recited on Saturday nights all year long.

IV. General Halakhot

It is a requirement to honor and enjoy yom tob. The Torah prescribes a special mitzvah to be joyous on the festival. One must make preparations for this purpose. Families eat together and guests are invited. In our happiness we are required to remember the lonely and needy and share our blessings with them. It is incumbent on all to make efforts to invite them to participate in our festive meals and to provide for their welfare.

Yom tob annuls the "*shib`ah*" for one who is "sitting" in mourning for a family member, including one sitting for father or mother. This applies only if the mourner sat at least a short time before the onset of the festival. Yom Kippur also annuls "*shib`ah*."

If someone passed away on the festival, the seven-day mourning period does not begin until after the conclusion of the complete festival, including hol hamo'ed. Until then, only restricted, private mourning is permitted. The second day of yom tob, when it concludes the festival, counts as day one since it is of rabbinical derivation and the individual did practice a degree of private mourning.

V. Prayers

In each amida of yom tob it is necessary to recite the portion that reflects the particular festival. If one mistakenly

prayed a weekday amida without mentioning the holiday he must repeat the amida and recite the one for yom tob. Musaf is recited daily, including during hol hamo'ed. Tefillin are not donned on yom tob. A special psalm associated with the theme of the day is recited for each yom tob, evening and morning.

Hallel is recited on all yamim tobim except on Rosh Hashanah. On the first two days of Pesah, on Shabu'ot, and on all nine days of Sukkot-Shemini Asseret, it is complete Hallel with a berakha; on the later days of Pesah it is recited without a berakha.

Special portions are read from two *Sifre Torah*. On yamim tobim there are at least five `olim to the Torah plus maftir. The Torah is not read at minha (unless it happens to be Shabbat).

Ya`ale veyabo is recited in birkat hamazon. If one concluded birkat hamazon and realized he did not recite it, he does not repeat, except on the first night of Pesah and the first night of Sukkot in the sukkah, as on these two occasions the requirement to eat at least a *kazzayit* matzah on Pesah and a *kazzayit* bread in the sukkah on Sukkot is mandatory. If one realized he did not recite *ya`ale veyabo* after concluding the third berakha but before beginning the fourth, he should make the relevant insertion as found in the *mahzor*.

On the Love of Torah¹

Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik

The Jew unceasingly seeks, indeed craves, Kedushah (sanctity) and Torah. The Ramban explains that the preface to the *Shir Shel Yom* is always “Today is the first (second, third, etc.) day in the Shabbat (cycle)” because the Jew counts each day with longing, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Shabbat. In a similar vein, the *Chinukh* explains that the counting of the Omer reflects the Jew’s awareness that the goal of the Exodus from Egypt was the receiving of the Torah, and by counting the days, the Jew demonstrates his impatient longing for Torah. Similarly, the mitzvah of *Tosefet Shabbat*, of ushering in the Sabbath some small time before its obligatory commencement at sunset, exemplifies the Jew’s impatient yearning for Kedushah.

This search for Kedushah is really a search for The Holy One, Hakadosh Baruch Hu Himself. Real Kedushah is found only when He “spreads the shelter of His peace (*sukkat shalom*)” over us.

The Talmud (Pesachim 113a) says that one who leaves over wine from the havdalah cup for the following week’s kiddush, is worthy of a share in the world to come, for such a person symbolizes that, even when one Shabbat is leaving, he is already anticipating the next one.

The Gemarah (Yoma 19b-20a) relates that once Yom Kippur was not properly observed in Nehardea and God explained that it was because of “*lapetach chatat roveitz*” (Genesis 4:7). In order to experience Yom Kippur properly, adequate preparation is needed. We start preparing on Rosh Chodesh Elul and gradually ready ourselves for Yom Kippur. During Elul, we must climb a very steep mountain.

¹ Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik zt”l delivered this lecture in 1973 upon completion of the first chapter of Hullin at Yeshiva University.

Yom Kippur is the summit, the apex, the day of reconciliation between God and man. One cannot cross immediately and directly into Kedushah. At the entrance to Kedushah (*petach*), if there is insufficient preparation, there is sin (*chataat*). In Nehardea, they were not prepared to experience the sanctity of the day.

Muktzeh, which actually means something not prepared from before Shabbat, may not be used on Shabbat because one must prepare for Shabbat. Preparation which is so important for experiencing Kedushah, is also important for Talmud Torah.

In a certain sense what Kedushah is for the Jew, Torah is for the *talmid hakham*. Torah should not just be an intellectual pastime. True, one can enjoy the intellectual creativity involved in Talmud Torah, but Talmud Torah should be an emotional experience as well; one should feel a tremor when engaged in it. The Torah should be seen not just as a book, but as a living personality, a queen like the *Shabbat Malketa*, with whom one can establish an I-thou relationship. In many places, the Torah is referred to as a personality, as for example: "The Torah said before The Holy One Blessed Be He." The study of Torah should be a dialogue, not a monologue. If I look at the Gemarah as simply paper and print, as merely a text, I would never be creative; Torah is a friend.

"Say to wisdom (Torah), thou art my sister" (Proverbs 7:4). If the Gemarah is approached as a plain text you might master it but you cannot be creative. To become a *lamdan* you must look at the Torah as an individual- a living personality. Then it becomes a part of you. I feel *committed* to defend the Rambam. Torah becomes a delight; it inspires you. There is a feeling of joy at having something precious, at having a treasure. But just as there is no Shabbat or Yom Kippur without preparing and questing, so also is this true concerning Talmud Torah.

To be a *lamdan* requires *hatmadah* and inquisitiveness and curiosity. If I love someone I am inquisitive, I am interested in him and in his plans.

If I were asked how an emotional experience can be had through studying the laws of monetary fines and damages etc., I would say that it is true that the exterior of Torah is formal and abstract, but behind the shell of conceptual abstractions there is a great fire burning, giving warmth and love, and one can love the Torah in turn with great passion. When you apprehend the Torah as a personality, not just as a book, it infiltrates your emotional as well as your intellectual life. An *am haaretz* cannot have this experience, and one cannot be a *lamdan* without it.

“Blessed art Thou...Who has commanded us to be involved (*la'asok*²) in the words of the Torah.” Torah is not only to be studied but demands an all encompassing involvement, *la'asok b'divrei torah*. Tosafot (Berakhot 11b sub. *shekvar*) asks why the blessing for Torah, recited once in the morning, suffices for each time one learns during the day no matter how many interruptions have taken place (e.g. one has gone to work), while the blessing for residing in the Sukkah must be recited anew each time one returns to the Sukkah after leaving it. They answer that since the obligation of Talmud Torah is continuous, *v'hagita bo yomam valailah* (Joshua 1:8) - one is always conscious of the mitzvah. However, any discontinuity of awareness (*heseich hada'at*) relating to the mitzvah of sukkah effectively requires that a new *berakhah* be recited each time the observance of the mitzvah is terminated and then subsequently renewed.

Apparently there are two kinds of awareness according to Tosafot. The first is an *acute awareness*; clearly this is lacking when one thinks about other matters. The second is

² This is in accordance with the Ashkenazic tradition. Sephardim recite “Al Dibre Torah” [Ed.]

latent awareness and this awareness is still present even though one is engaged in other matters.

When a mother plays with her child there is an acute awareness of the child. But even when the mother works at a job or is distracted by some other activity, there is a natural latent awareness of her child's existence. This latent awareness remains throughout her entire lifetime and can never be extinguished. It is expressed in commitment, devotion, and in a feeling of identification, a feeling that I and the baby are one. The infant is the center of gravity of the parents' lives. They feel they cannot live without their child.

The same is true with regards to Torah. There may not be an acute awareness of Torah for twenty four hours each day. But the latent awareness never ceases. The injunction which forbids discontinuity of awareness from Torah is measured in terms of "*pen yasuru milevavekhah*" (lest Torah be forgotten from your heart-Deut. 4:9), not in terms of "*pen yasuru mililmod*" (lest Torah not be studied). All the injunctions against *heseich hada'at* from Torah do not refer to a discontinuity of acute awareness. Rather they refer to a discontinuity of latent awareness, which, as already mentioned is expressed in commitment, devotion, and self-identification with Torah. When even the latent awareness-the commitment to Torah- is forgotten and is dismissed from mind, then one is "worthy of death." This is the reason we say "*la'asok b'divrei Torah*." *La'asok* implies that even when we are mentally involved with something else, we are aware of Torah. This awareness of Torah should become part of one's I-awareness. Just as I am always aware of my existence without having to walk around saying "I exist, I exist," so should I be aware of Torah.

If the blessing were "*lilmod Torah*" (to study Torah) and related only to the cognitive act, then any discontinuity of the acute awareness of Torah would require that a blessing be recited every time Torah study commenced anew after a

previous discontinuity- just like the blessing for the Sukkah must be repeated with every new entry.

V'hagita (in the verse "*V'hagita bo yomam valaila*"), refers not to the actual study of Torah, but to the mitzvah of latent awareness of Torah. *Higayon* does not refer to thinking in the sense of pure intellectual detached thought. Rather it refers to awareness of personal desires, wishes and concerns; it refers to a deeply felt longing and questing, as in "*v'hegyon libi*" (Psalms 19:15), which refers to awareness of one's prayers and petitions. No matter how much involved one is in other matters, there should always be an awareness of the appreciation of Torah as the highest value.

For this reason when we make a *siyum* we say *hadran alakh*-we still return to you. As far as acute awareness is concerned we are through, we are leaving this chapter. But the latent awareness remains and for that reason we still return again to learn Chullin. It is just like when a mother leaves her child and says "I'll be back." She does not say this merely to encourage the infant. She expresses a basic truth. A mother leaves only to return; otherwise she would never leave.

Daatan alakh- in our latent awareness we are still committed to you.

V'daatakh alan- we hope you won't forget us. We hope that you, the tractate, will also keep us in mind, and if we view the Torah as a friend, the Torah will indeed be able to watch over us.

On the Minhag of Studying Torah Leil Shabuot

Rabbi Asher Margaliot

The Magen Abraham, based on a Midrashic account, states: “At the Revelation at Sinai, when the time came for the Torah to be given, many fell asleep and the Almighty had to awaken them. We must rectify this through our staying awake and studying Torah through the night” (Orah Hayim 494). How many times during the year have we slept or idled away time during which we should have been studying Torah! How many times were we inattentive while listening to the Torah being read! Indeed, it is appropriate to express our regret at these shortcomings before commemorating receiving the Torah. The *Hoq Ya’aqob*, based on the Zohar, explains that the pious remain awake and labor in Torah all night as an expression of eagerness and anticipation for a great, precious event. “Let us go to our possession, the sacred inheritance designated for us and our children.” The Zohar commends those who thus could anticipate the hour of receiving the Torah, when the people of Israel became joined to the Torah and both became as one. Rabbi Israel Nagara elaborates thus: “since the hour of the giving of the Torah is, as it were, the hour of wedding between Israel and the Torah, it is proper to be engaged in preparing the ornaments of the bride the previous night.”

The Rambam, in codifying our ancient traditions regarding the approach to the study of Torah all year long, states: “A person learns most of his wisdom by night.” Perhaps the later rabbis chose to establish the main learning of Shabu’ot at night to also reflect this concept.

The *Shelah Haqadosh* relates that on *Leil Shabu’ot* the Divine Presence was revealed to Maran Rabbi Yosef Karo and his companions, who were studying Torah all that night, and said to them: “Happy are you and happy is your

portion.” Those who dedicate their speech, actions and thought to Torah study on this night more readily merit the revelation of the Torah’s intricacies and achieve a deeper understanding in their learning.

The Kabbalah sages prescribed an order of study, or *tiqqun*, for *Leil Shabu`ot*, comprising passages from each parasha and each Book of the written Torah, plus selections from Mishnah and Zohar. The Ten Commandments are read twice. Megillat Ruth is entirely read as it relates the inspiring story of a non-Jewess fully turning to Judaism.

Some communities read a brief synopsis of the 613 mitzvot. Some communities, in accordance with the Midrashic statement that the Torah was very difficult to understand until Mishle was written, read the entire Book of Mishle, for its parables contain the key to much of the Torah.

Regarding those not initiated into the Kabbalah, the Zohar portions of the *tiqqun*, or any other portions of Zohar, there are two opinions. Some say reading Zohar is “good for the soul” even if one does not understand what he is reading. Others claim that it is more appropriate to skip the Zohar and study those portions of the Torah which one may understand.

The *Hoq Ya`aqob* is of the opinion that the *tiqqun* was established for the unlearned, but a scholar may study whatever Torah subject his heart desires. In many great Ashkenazic yeshivot the custom of staying up all night was observed but the order of study was Talmud, not the *tiqqun*. Today many scholars do follow the practice of reading the *tiqqun* on this night.

The *Ben Ish Hai* writes that even if one cannot stay up all night for whatever reason, he should nonetheless recite the Tanakh portion of the *tiqqun*.

May we all continue to go from strength to strength and merit rewards for our study and contemplation of Torah especially on this Festival of the Giving of the Torah.

Counting Time¹

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The human body contains 100 trillion cells. Within each cell is a nucleus. Within each nucleus is a double copy of the human genome. Each genome contains 3.1 billion letters of genetic code, enough if transcribed to fill a library of five thousand books. Each cell, in other words, contains a blueprint of the entire body of which it is a part. The cumulative force of these scientific discoveries is nothing short of wondrous. In ways undreamt of by our ancestors, we now know to what extent the microcosm is a map of the microcosm. From a single cell, it may be possible to reconstruct an entire organism.

Does this apply to Judaism? I want in this study to look at an apparently tiny detail of Jewish law - a single cell, as it were, of a highly complex structure. Could it be that patient and detailed study of this fragment will reveal to us something of the totality of Judaism's spiritual world? If so, more may be at stake than understanding one aspect of Judaism. We might begin to see how halakhah and aggadah are related, law and narrative, practice and philosophy. Judaism might then begin to disclose itself to us as more than a series of laws - as, in fact, nothing less than an entire way of seeing the world and responding to it with the totality of our being. We might discover a more expansive way of studying Jewish texts.

We are at the moment in the midst of fulfilling one of the commands in this week's sedra [perasha], the counting of the Omer:

“From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the

¹ This article was written for Shabbat Parashat Emor, May 8th 2004.

seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD” (Lev. 23: 15-16).

Historically, this passage had profound reverberations within Judaism because of the ambiguity in the phrase, “from the day after the Sabbath.” This was important because on it depended the date of Shavuot, Pentecost. Some groups in ancient Judaism read the phrase literally to mean Sunday, with the result that for them Shavuot always fell on a Sunday seven weeks later. Others, relying on oral tradition, interpreted it to mean “from the day after the festival [i.e. the first day of Passover].” That is our custom. The resulting argument over the calendar was one of the major disputes within Judaism in the late Second Temple period. However, that is not our concern here.

While the Temple stood, the counting was initiated by bringing an offering of new grain. Since the destruction of the Temple, the command has been fulfilled by counting alone - each night for seven weeks. A question arose during the period of the Geonim (between the closure of the Talmud and the era of its great commentators, i.e. between the eighth and eleventh centuries). What is the law for someone who forgets to count one of the 49 days? May he continue to count the rest, or has he forfeited the entire command for that year? There were two sharply contrasting views. According to the *Halakhot Gedolot* (a work usually attributed to R. Shimon Kayyara) the person has indeed forfeited the chance to fulfill the command. According to R. Hai Gaon he has not. He continues to count the remaining days, unaffected by his failure to count one of the forty-nine.

How are we to understand this disagreement? According to the *Halakhot Gedolot*, the key phrase is “seven full [temimot, i.e. complete] weeks.” One who forgets a day cannot satisfy the requirement of completeness. On this view, the 49 days constitute a single religious act, and if one

of the parts is missing, the whole is defective. What is this like? It is like a Torah scroll. If a single letter is missing, the entire scroll is invalid. So too in the case of counting days.

According to R. Hai Gaon however, each day of the 49 is a separate command - "Count off fifty days." Therefore, if one fails to keep one of the commands, that is no impediment to keeping the others. If, for example, one fails to pray on a given day, that neither excuses nor prevents one from praying on subsequent days. Each day is a temporal entity in itself, unaffected by what happened before or after. The same applies to the Omer. Forgetting one day does not invalidate the others.

The final law mediates between these two opinions. Out of respect for R. Hai, we count the subsequent days, but out of respect for the *Halakhot Gedolot* we do so without a blessing - an elegant compromise.

We might, before moving on, note one salient fact. Usually in the case of a dispute about Jewish law, the doubt lies in us, not in the biblical text. God has spoken, but we are not sure what the words mean. In the case of counting the Omer, however, the doubt lies within the biblical text itself. Unusually, the command is specified in two quite different ways:

1. "Count off seven full weeks"
2. "Count off fifty days"

There is a view that this dual characterization signals two distinct commands, to count the days, and to count the weeks. However, as we have seen, it also suggests two quite different ways of understanding the counting itself - as a single extended process (*Halakhot Gedolot*) or as fifty distinct acts (Hai Gaon). This duality was not born in the minds of two halakhic authorities. It is there in the biblical text itself.

Within Judaism there are two kinds of time. One way of seeing this is in a Talmudic story about two of the great sages of the Second Temple period, Hillel and Shammai:

They used to say about Shammai the elder that all his life he ate in honor of the Sabbath. So, if he found a well-favored animal he would say, "Let this be for the Sabbath." If he later found a better one, he would put aside the second for the Sabbath and eat the first. But Hillel the elder had a different approach, for all his deeds were for the sake of heaven, as it is said, "Blessed be the Lord day by day" (Ps. 68: 20). It was likewise taught: The school of Shammai say, From the first day of the week, prepare for the Sabbath, but the school of Hillel say, "Blessed be the Lord day by day" (bBetza 16a).

Shammai lived in teleological time, time as a journey toward a destination. Already from the beginning of a week, he was conscious of its end. We speak, in one of our prayers, of the Sabbath as "last in deed, first in thought." Time on this view is not a mere sequence of moments. It has a purpose, a direction, a destination.

Hillel, by contrast, lived each day in and for itself, without regard to what came before or what would come after. We speak in our prayers of G-d who "in his goodness, each day renews the work of creation." On this view, each sequence of time is an entity in itself. The universe is continually being renewed. Each day is a universe; each has its own challenge, its task, its response. Faith, for Hillel, is a matter of taking each day as it comes, trusting in G-d to give the totality of time its shape and direction.

The dispute is strikingly similar to the more recent disagreement about the nature of light. Is it a continuous wave or a series of particles? Paradoxically, it is both, and this can be experimentally demonstrated.

The argument, however, goes much deeper. Much has been written about two highly distinctive forms of time consciousness.

Ancient civilizations tended to see time as a circle - cyclical time. That is how we experience time in nature. Each day is marked by the same succession of events: dawn, sunrise, the gradual trajectory of the sun across the sky to its setting and to nightfall. The year is a succession of seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Life itself is a repeated sequence of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. Many of these moments, especially the transition from one to another, are marked by religious ritual.

Cyclical time is time as a series of eternal recurrences. Beneath the apparent changes, the world remains the same. The book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) contains a classic statement of cyclical time (Ecc. 1: 4-5, 7, 9):

4 Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises . . .

7 All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again . . .

9 What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

In Judaism, priestly time is cyclical time. Each part of the day, the week and the year has its specific sacrifice, unaffected by what is happening in the world of events. Halakhah - Jewish law - is priestly in this sense. Though all else may change, the law does not change. It represents eternity in the midst of time.

In this respect, Judaism did not innovate. However, according to many anthropologists and historians, a quite

new and different form of time was born in ancient Israel. Often, this is called linear time. I prefer the phrase covenantal time. The Hebrew Bible is the first document to see time as an arena of change. Tomorrow need not be the same as yesterday. There is nothing given, eternal and immutable about the way we construct societies and live our lives together. Time is not a series of moments traced on the face of a watch, always moving yet always the same. Instead it is a journey with a starting point and a destination, or a story with a beginning, middle and end. Each moment has a meaning, which can only be grasped if we understand where we have come from and where we are going to. This is time not as it is in nature but as it is in history. The Hebrew prophets were the first to see G-d in history.

A prophet is one who sees the end in the beginning. While others are at ease, he foresees the catastrophe. While others are mourning the catastrophe, he can already see the eventual consolation. There is a famous example of this in the Talmud. Rabbi Akiva is walking with his colleagues on Mount Scopus when they see the ruins of the Temple. They weep. He smiles. When they ask him why he is smiling, he replies: Now that I have seen the realization of the prophecies of destruction, shall I not believe in the prophecies of restoration? They see the present; he sees the future-in-the-present. Knowing the previous chapters of the story, he understands not only the present chapter, but also where it is leading to. That is prophetic consciousness - time as a narrative, time not as it is in nature but in history, or more specifically in covenant history, whose events are determined by free human choices but whose themes have been set long in advance.

If we look at the festivals of the bible - Pesah, Shavuot and Sukkot - we see that each has a dual logic. On the one hand, they belong to cyclical time. They celebrate seasons of the year - Pesah is the festival of spring, Shavuot of first fruits, and Sukkot of the autumn harvest.

However, they also belong to covenantal/linear/historical time. They commemorate historic events. Pesah celebrates the exodus from Egypt, Shavuot the giving of the Torah, and Sukkot the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It follows that the counting of the Omer also has two temporal dimensions.

On the one hand, it belongs to cyclical time. The forty-nine days represent the period of the grain harvest, the time during which farmers had most to thank G-d for - for "bringing forth bread from the ground." Thus understood, each day of the counting is a separate religious act: "Blessed be the Lord day by day." Each day brought forth its own blessing in the form of new grain, and each therefore called for its own act of thanksgiving. This is time as Hillel and R. Hai Gaon understood it. "Count off fifty days" - each of which is a command in itself, unaffected by the days that came before or those that will come after.

But the Omer is also part of historical time. It represents the journey from Egypt to Sinai, from exodus to revelation. This is, on the biblical worldview, an absolutely crucial transition. The late Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke of two kinds of freedom, negative liberty (the freedom to do what you like) and positive liberty (the freedom to do what you ought). Hebrew has two different words for these different forms of freedom: *chofesh* and *cherut*. *Chofesh* is the freedom a slave acquires when he no longer has a master. It means that there is no one to tell you what to do. You are master of your own time.

This kind of freedom alone, however, cannot be the basis of a free society. If everyone is free to do what they like, the result will be freedom for the strong but not the weak, the rich but not the poor, the powerful but not the powerless. A free society requires restraint and the rule of law. There is such a thing as a constitution of liberty. That is what the Israelites acquired at Mount Sinai in the form of the covenant.

In this sense, the 49 days represent an unbroken historical sequence. There is no way of going directly from escape-from-tyranny to a free society - as we have discovered time and again in recent years, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Here, time is an ordered sequence of events, a journey, a narrative. Miss one stage, and one is in danger of losing everything. This is time as *Halakhot Gedolot* understood it: "Count off seven full weeks," with the emphasis on "full, complete, unbroken."

Thus, both forms of time are present in a single mitzvah- the counting of the Omer - as they are in the festivals themselves.

We have traced, in the argument between the two authorities of the period of the Geonim, a deeper duality, going back to Hillel and Shammai, and further still to the biblical era and the difference, in consciousness of time, between priests and prophets. There is the voice of G-d in nature, and the call of G-d in history. There is the word of G-d for all time, and the word of G-d for this time. The former is heard by the priest, the latter by the prophet. The former is found in halakhah, Jewish law; the latter in aggadah, Jewish reflection on history and destiny. G-d is not to be found exclusively in one or the other, but in their conversation and complex interplay.

There are aspects of the human condition that do not change, but there are others that do. It was the greatness of the biblical prophets to hear the music of covenant beneath the noise of events, giving history its shape and meaning as the long, slow journey to redemption. The journey has been slow. The abolition of slavery, the recognition of human rights, the construction of a society of equal dignity - these have taken centuries, millennia. But they happened only because people learned to see inequalities and injustices as something other than inevitable. Time is not a series of eternal recurrences in which nothing ever ultimately changes. Cyclical time is deeply conservative; covenantal

time is profoundly revolutionary. Both find their expression in the counting of the Omer.

Thus, an apparently minor detail in Jewish law turns out, on inspection under the microscope of analysis, to tell us much about the philosophy and politics of Judaism - about the journey from liberation to a free society, and about time as the arena of social change. The Torah begins with creation as the free act of the free G-d, who bestows the gift of freedom on the one life-form that bears His image. But that is not enough. We must create structures that honor that freedom and make it equally available to all. That is what was given at Sinai. Each year we retrace that journey, for if we are not conscious of freedom and what it demands of us, we will lose it. To see G-d not only in nature but also in history - that is the distinctive contribution of Judaism to Western civilization, and we find it in one of the most apparently minor commands: to count the days between negative and positive liberty, from liberation to revelation.

Feast of Weeks - What's in the Name?¹

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

What is the real significance of the Festival of Shavuot, the only Festival of the bible without a name which truly defines its essence?! Unlike Pesah, which refers to the Pascal lamb sacrifice which was the defining moment of Israelite commitment to the G-d of Abraham in defiance of the gods of Egypt, thereby making them worthy of, and setting the stage for, their exodus from Egyptian slavery, and Sukkot which refers to the booths in which the Israelites dwelt during their miraculous sojourn in the desert, Shavuot connotes the weeks leading up to a specific day rather than to the day itself! Is it not mandatory for us to attempt to truly understand the message of this second - and major - “pilgrim” festivals (the second of our shalosh regalim)?

Fascinatingly enough, both the precise date as well as the true meaning of this “mystery” Festival of Shavuot is dependant upon a famous historical controversy which raged between the Pharisees and Saducees, two ideological “parties” which vied for ascendancy during the Mishnaic period (c. 200 BCE - 200 CE). The Sadducees, who traced their origins to the well-known priestly clan of Zadok and were committed to the plain meaning of the Bible without the inclusion of the Oral Traditions, maintained that the Biblical command to count seven weeks (Sefirah), “You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the Sabbath” (Lev. 3:15), refers to the first Sunday after the onset of Passover, from when you must continue to count seven complete weeks (from Sunday to Sunday), at the

¹ This article was originally published on June 11, 2005 for Shabu'ot in Efrat, Israel.

conclusion of which “you shall make the Festival of Shavuot” (Deut.16:10).

These seven weeks fall out during the first harvest period in Israel, beginning with the harvest of the barley (which is the initial omer sacrifice to be brought on that Saturday night) and culminating in the wheat harvest which is expressed by the two loaves of wheat which is the central vegetation Temple sacrifice and “first-fruits” gift of Shavuot.

The Pharisees, who are the forerunners of the Talmudic Sages and who endowed “last-word” authority to the Oral Tradition of Biblical interpretation (Hebrew *perush*), insisted that the Biblical phrase “the morrow of the Sabbath” refers to the day following the first day of the Passover Festival (taking the Hebrew Shabbat to be identified in this context with Shabbaton, which is Biblically used for Festival elsewhere in that very same Biblical passage of Lev. 23). It is apparent that the date for the Shavuot Festival would differ, depending upon which ideological position determined from when you begin your count!

So divisive did this difference of opinion prove itself to be- after all, the unity of the Jewish people is clearly dependent upon the commonality of the Hebrew calendar - that the day in which this controversy was settled (obviously in accordance with the Pharisees, which is our current practice) was declared to be a semi-Festival upon which one should neither fast nor recite a eulogy (B.T. Ta'anit 17b, Menahot 65a, based on Megillat Ta'anit).

What was the real significance of their debate? I heard from my revered teacher Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik the following interpretation. According to the Sadducees, the Festival of Shavuot is completely separate and apart from the Festival of Passover, relating not at all to the exodus from Egypt but only to the agricultural reality of the Land of Israel; hence a unit of seven complete weeks - from

Sunday to Sunday, beginning the first Sunday from the onset of Passover only because Passover also happens to fall out in the harvesting season - spans the barley to wheat harvest, which is to be seen as a separate period of thanksgiving to G-d, for an agricultural rather than an historical reason. From this perspective, Shavuot is a separate agricultural Festival specifically celebrating the climax of the period with the wheat harvest, but logically incorporating within its name the entire 7-week period of harvest, from barley to wheat.

The Pharisees have a totally different interpretation. The very fact that the Oral Tradition insists that the sefirah count begin on the night following the first day of Passover- even if it falls out in the middle of the week (as it usually does) - links the seven week count inextricably to the Festival of Passover, with the Biblical “until the day following the seventh week you shall count, fifty days” coming out 50 days from the onset of Passover! This indissoluble bond between Passover and Shavuot is not all necessarily true according to the Sadducees.

For the Pharisees, Shavuot contains an historical as well as an agricultural significance; the Oral Law defines Shavuot as the time in which we received the Torah from Mount Sinai. Indeed, from the perspective of the Pharisees, Passover is an incomplete Festival, awaiting its completion in the Festival of Shavuot. Passover is merely our freedom from physical bondage, awaiting our freedom from spiritual bondage (the internal blandishments of temptations and addictions) which only comes with the giving of the Torah on Shavuot; Passover is “freedom from” (*herut*), which, unchannelled, can lead to wild recklessness and licentiousness, awaiting the mission of Torah which will provide us with “freedom for” (*aharayut*). On Passover we only get as far as the desert, an alien, hostile and undeveloped expanse, awaiting our entrance into Israel and construction of our Holy Temple which the Bible identifies

with Shavuot, the Festival of the First Fruits Temple sacrifice; Passover is the first step, our Festival of Fate when G-d forced us out of Egypt with His “outstretched arm and strong hand,” whereas Shavuot is our Festival of Destiny, when - by our truly choosing to follow the dictates of Torah - we will lead the world to peace and redemption from the backdrop of Israel and Jerusalem (Isaiah 2, Micah 4).

Hence, Shavuot is named by the Pharisaic Sages of the Talmud Atzeret, which means “conclusion”, with the days of the omer count serving as a connective “holo shel mo`ed” between the beginning of our freedom on Passover and freedom’s culmination in redemption on Shavuot. The progression from the one to the other demands rigorous introspection and repentance, commitment to our Torah and its ideals for world repair; the days of the Sefirah must be days of perseverance, preparation, penitence and purification. After all, did not the sanctity of G-d’s heavenly throne appear to the elders of Israel at the Sinai Revelation as “white-blue sapphire,” and are not the mystical sefirot the emanations of the Divine with which we must sanctify ourselves and our world?

Therefore the culminating Festival of this period is known by the days of preparation, Shavuot; it itself does not yet have a name because we have not yet reached the level of complete redemption. And we read the Book of Ruth, the last chapter of which takes place between the barley and wheat harvest, and which tells of a Moabite woman inspired by the loving Torah of the land of Israel and from whose womb will eventually come the king/redeemer - but only when we become truly worthy!

Reflections on the Decalogue¹

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

1. Innovative Concepts

The Ten Commandments comprise a unique set of laws that introduced concepts of the highest order to mankind. This compendium, more accurately referred to as the Decalogue – a term derived from the Greek-Latin rendering of *asseret hadebarim*, the ten words or pronouncements, a phrase thrice-attested in the Torah (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13, 10:4) – appears twice in the Five Books. In Exodus 20 it is embedded in the Torah's narrative description of the early stages of Israel's development as a nation; indeed, presented as the natural unfolding of G-d's covenant with the patriarchs and the fundamental element that defines Israel's national identity. In Deuteronomy 5, Moshe recites it early in his valedictory address through which he leads Israel to a covenant renewal shortly before his death. (There are a number of differences between the two formulations, most of which we will address in our study *On Decalogue Variations*².)

Following are four major features of this remarkable proclamation that manifest original, even revolutionary concepts. Each is linked with several associated innovative notions.

1. The Decalogue constitutes the essence of Hashem's Revelation to Israel. Its precepts were the foundation upon which He enacted a covenant with the nation, establishing an intimate relationship between Him and man, an association with far-reaching consequences. The tablets on

¹ This study is from Rabbi Shamah's commentary on parashat Yitro.

² Referenced studies of Rabbi Shamah may be found online at www.judaic.org.

which the Decalogue was inscribed are “Tablets of the Covenant” (לוחות הברית, Deut. 9:9, 15) while the ark in which they resided is the “Ark of the Covenant” (אֲרוֹן הַבְּרִית, Josh. 3:6, et al). It was through acceptance of the Decalogue and the laws understood to be attached to it that G-d had declared He would make Israel His “treasure” among the nations and it would become a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). Analogous to priests serving within a nation is Israel to serve among the nations, responsible to bring the consciousness of Hashem to the world and inspire the nations to fulfill His will. Thus will the hope that He expressed to Abraham at the initiation of the enterprise of creating a new nation from his progeny, that it will be a source of blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3), be realized.

Although suzerain-vassal covenants that required exclusive loyalty between vassal nations and their suzerains or subjects with their kings were popular in the ancient Near East, the notion of such a relationship between a nation and a deity was unprecedented. To formalize the G-d-Israel Covenant, the Decalogue contains in a compact form the most essential elements contemporary protocol prescribed for enacting suzerain-vassal treaties:

- The opening verse begins with Hashem’s majestic self-identification, stating His name as well as His relationship to Israel.
- A reminder of the great benefaction He bestowed on Israel in redeeming it from the house of bondage immediately follows.
- Next, the fundamental stipulations He demands from His people are enumerated. (It is understood that additional ones would be added.)
- A statement of punishment for violation and reward for compliance is included, attached to the prohibition of engaging in any form of idolatry. In addition, a

reward of “length of days on the land” is mentioned with the precept of honoring father and mother.

The remaining covenant requirements – essentially technical details – consist of committing the particulars to writing, designating witnesses, providing for safekeeping, partaking of a finalizing ceremonial meal and a declaration of Blessings and Curses. They are described in succeeding chapters. Indeed, the Books of Exodus-Leviticus combined on the one hand and the Book of Deuteronomy on the other, each in a self-contained manner, are structured in accordance with covenant protocol as we intend to demonstrate in a study on covenant format in the Torah. Utilizing the conventional model for the external framework of the Covenant conferred the highest degree of significance upon it since kings had vigorously insisted on the supreme importance of covenantal commitments. It also helped make clear to the recipients, in terms they were familiar with, what was being transacted.

As the Covenant established a relationship with the eternal G-d who was also concerned for the long-term future, it transformed Israel into a permanent corporate entity and placed great concern on bringing in the children. Each individual in the nation was to be viewed as in a direct relationship with and personally charged by G-d, having to answer to Him, as opposed to being exhorted by a king, priest or tribal chieftain. This is reflected in the Decalogue’s use of the second person singular; this notion helped advance a democratization process. The latter is connected to the lofty status granted each human being by virtue of everybody being derived from common human ancestors who were created by the one G-d as well as from His having created all humankind “in His image” (Gen. 1:26-27), applications of the Torah’s revolution in thought.

2. The first two pronouncements* enunciate details of the immense advance in religion related to belief in one G-d.

Israel must recognize Hashem as its sole G-d, whose sovereignty extends over all realms of the world, and be completely faithful to Him. All manner and aspects of idolatry are strictly prohibited. When fully developed and applications spelled out by the prophets, the belief that there is only one G-d, continually concerned for kindness, righteousness and justice, led to the uncompromising responsibility for consistent moral and ethical action. Superstitions were ruled out as were all sorts of rationalizations for inappropriate and divisive behavior that the belief in multiple deities fostered. Idolatry became recognized as man's dangerous distraction from morality, stemming from his undisciplined raw drives and his unbridled ego, serving his own creations. Belief in one G-d heightened recognition of the universal brotherhood concept latent in the Creation account and promoted abiding concern for all human beings, leading to the vision of an eventual end to wars with peace on earth.

3. Commandment 4, Shabbat, is a multi-faceted innovation of enormous significance with applications in various realms. As a day "for Hashem" that is commemorated on the seventh day of each week without exception on which work must cease, it provides a recurring national reminder of Hashem having created the world and all in it in six days and resting on the seventh. It is a day to be perceived as His having already sanctified and blessed from Creation. And since the prohibition to work is not limited to Israelites but includes the Israelite's male and female slaves, animals, and "your stranger within your gates" (an individual in your circle, dependent on you), the implication is that G-d's will is that we be compassionate on all His creations. Releasing the slave from labor for twenty-four hours cannot but prompt thoughts of his welfare and foster advances in social justice.

In the Deuteronomy version of the Decalogue, Shabbat's primary purposes are defined as, "in order that

your male and female slave may rest as you do” and that “you remember you were a slave in Egypt” and Hashem redeemed you from there (Deut. 5:14-15). The Shabbat passage in *Parashat Ki Tissa* highlights the day as a celebration of the Covenant (Ex. 31:12-17).

A day of rest rejuvenates and transforms life in both the physical and domestic spheres. Sanctifying the day and distinguishing it as dedicated to Hashem, in whichever manner such responsibilities were to be put into practical effect, promote spiritual welfare as well as family and communal cohesiveness. We read that in the days of the prophets these purposes were fulfilled by establishing Shabbat as a joyous festival that celebrated the values the day stands for (Isa. 58:13), and making it an occasion to visit a prophet (2 Kings 4:23) or the sanctuary (Isa. 66:23).

Although seven-day units were employed for various purposes in the ancient Near East – reflecting the symbolic prominence of the number seven – it is only Israel that had established the week as an ongoing, regularly occurring subdivision of time. In addition, all Near Eastern major celebrations were then associated with one astral phenomenon or another involving sun, moon or stars. Thus, it surely is meaningful that the unit of a week does not correspond to any celestial movement and the Shabbat celebration is free of any such linkage.

4. The mode of articulation of most of the Decalogue commandments is unique and in a legally advanced form. Except for those commandments demanding exclusive service of Hashem and Shabbat, the other precepts were “on the books” of the world’s great civilizations prior to *Mattan Torah*. Indeed, regulations prescribing respect for the names of the gods, the honoring of parents and the prohibitions of murder, adultery, stealing and false testimony had long been legislated in Near Eastern society. However, there are major differences between the manner the pre-Torah world understood and codified these laws

and their formulation in the Decalogue. In no pre-Torah society were they recognized as categorical imperatives that derived from a Divine source, incumbent upon each member of society to fulfill at all times regardless of social status or any personal considerations, as they are presented in the Decalogue's terse and apodictic style.

That the Covenant was contracted before Israel entered the Promised Land, an occurrence that was to be relatively imminent, also possesses an innovative character. It is important for a nation to possess its own land, a matter generally conceived as critical to its identity. G-d had promised a land to Abraham from the very beginning, one of the reasons undoubtedly being for it to become an arena in which the laws of the Torah may fully flourish and an example may be set for other nations. Nevertheless, He did not consider it necessary to establish the Covenant upon the nation's land. Israel's self-identity as a nation was established through the Covenant contracted in the wilderness!

2. Direct Perception and Moshe's Mediation

An ancient tradition recorded in the Talmud (BT *Mak.* 23b-24a) relates that the people heard the first two commandments מפי הַגְּבוּרָה ("from the mouth of the Might"), meaning directly from Hashem, whereas the remaining eight they heard through the mediation of Moshe. This is likely based on a straightforward interpretation of the Decalogue format as indicated by the syntax. In the first two commandments G-d speaks of Himself in first person, addressing the people in second person: I, Hashem, am your G-d; you shall have no other gods besides Me...for I, Hashem your G-d, am a jealous G-d, etc. In the third, fourth and fifth commandments, He is referred to in the third person: Do not take the name of Hashem your G-d in vain; a Sabbath for Hashem your G-d;

that you may have long days on the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you. The last five commandments are case-neutral but from the overall context it was perhaps assumed that they continue along the same line as the previous three.

The reason for this change appears to be described in the brief account that immediately follows G-d's proclamation of the Decalogue in Exodus (20:15-18) and Moshe's review of it in Deuteronomy (5:20-24). The people were awe-struck and terrified by the overpowering experience of encountering the Divine and felt they could not maintain the high level of discipline required. They were committed to G-d's program but feared that they would die and so they asked Moshe to relate the Divine words to them. Although the text records this request subsequent to the completion of the proclamation, it may very well be describing the people's reaction and dialogue with Moshe that occurred at some point in the midst of the experience. In order not to interrupt the narration of the proclamation, the request was described afterwards.

In Moshe's Deuteronomy retrospective, just before he recounted the Decalogue and after he reminded the people that Hashem spoke to them "face to face from the midst of the fire," he reminded them that he "stood between Hashem and you at that time to relate to you Hashem's word because you feared the fire..." (Deut. 5:4-5). In the post-Decalogue passage there, the people are described as having expressed the fear that they would die if they "continued" hearing Hashem's voice (5:22), affirming that they did hear some of His words. This probably means that they heard the first part, at which point they communicated their fears to Moshe and a change in format was instituted.

In Exodus, when the people requested Moshe's mediation, we are informed that he reassured them. He explained that G-d's purpose for them to have had a direct national prophetic experience was to test them (to challenge and prove them) and to instill in them reverence for Him in

order to prevent their sinning. Having such an encounter with G-d etched in its national historic consciousness would be a powerful motivational factor for the nation to maintain its future reverence for Him. In introducing His purpose for Revelation, G-d told Moshe: "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and also so that they shall trust in you evermore" (Ex. 19:9). A purpose of Revelation was for the people to believe that G-d does communicate His will to human beings and that they should be able to trust His legitimate prophet and the laws received through him.

In Deuteronomy, after reciting the Decalogue and reminding the nation of its request for his mediation, Moshe elaborates with a somewhat different emphasis. He quotes G-d to the general effect of being satisfied with the people's positive disposition in requesting Moshe's mediation and that He has hope that they would maintain their reverence for Him in the future.

At a later point in Moshe's Deuteronomic discourse, when he exhorts Israel not to heed soothsayers and sorcerers, etc., as do the nations G-d is dispossessing from before them, he returns to our subject. Once again he quotes Israel's statement and G-d's response, with further details:

...not such has Hashem your G-d designated for you. A prophet from your midst, from your brethren, like me, Hashem your G-d will raise for you, him shall you heed. In accordance with what you asked from Hashem your G-d at Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying: "Let me not continue hearing the voice of Hashem my G-d and this great fire let me not see, that I not die." And Hashem said to me, "They did well in what they spoke. A prophet will I raise for them from their brethren, like you, and I will place My words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him" (Deut. 18:14-18).

The prophetic experience was to continue into the future in one form or another. It is the alternative to the various forms of divination that the pagan nations engaged in. The latter practices, steeped in idolatrous magic and wonder-working, are intertwined with abominations (as the previous verses in that Deuteronomy 18 passage make clear), whereas the prophet who receives his inspiration from G-d will lead the nation in the moral path.

The people's decision at the Lawgiving not to continue to see the fire accords with the system of G-d inspiring outstanding individuals with the gift of prophecy for the benefit of the masses. In this regard, one cannot help but think of Moshe's response to his disciple Joshua. Upon hearing the report that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp, Joshua asked Moshe to restrain them. Moshe's response: "Are you jealous for me? Would that all Hashem's people be prophets that Hashem place His spirit upon them" (Num. 11:29).

3. Symbolism of the Fire

In Deuteronomy, the people's fear that they would die if they continued to hear G-d's voice was expressed with reference to being consumed by the great fire (Deut. 5:22-23). Regarding that fire – extensively cited by Moshe in Deuteronomy but referred to in a subdued manner in Exodus – and what it represents, it is worthwhile to read Rabbi S. D. Sassoon's statement on the Symbolism of the Fire. (Excerpted and translated from *Natan Hokhmah Lishlomo*, Heb. section, p. 191.)

...It may be that most of the Ten Commandments were previously acknowledged, such as You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, etc., but what was new to their consciousness at Sinai was that these laws possess absoluteness...drawn from the absolute unity of the Creator, which spreads over the whole

creation and is reflected within it and brings about an absoluteness to the values of compassion and justice, which are expressions of Hashem's unity.

At Sinai, as Hashem's absolute unity became known to them, they recognized His will is absolute in its demands and that it is the sole dispenser of life and true sustenance to each creature. This reality brings about the situation that whomever distances himself from the path of life that Hashem, blessed be He, revealed is destined for total destruction, whether speaking of an individual or a complete nation.

Hashem's words emanate from the fire: "His words you heard from the midst of the fire" (Deut. 4:36), that means to say, that the command did not reach your ears and understanding as an arbitrary command, that is, as a proper and worthwhile precept, but as an absolutely required command that does not tolerate annulment, and whose abandonment is complete destruction. It is this destruction that the fire symbolizes: "For lo, they who distance themselves from You shall perish, You destroy all those who stray from You (Ps. 73:27).

It is this absoluteness of the law that is the essential revelation of Sinai, that accompanies the revelation of "that Hashem, He is the G-d in heavens above and on earth below, there is none else" (Deut. 4:39). That is why the term *מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ* ("from the midst of the fire") in conjunction with Hashem's words at Sinai appears ten times in Deuteronomy (4:12,15,33,36; 5:4,19,21, 23; 9:10; 10:4) to emphasize this absoluteness.

This is also the reason the Torah represents Hashem as fire (Deut. 4:24; 9:3).

Although this fire consumes and destroys all that is in opposition to Hashem's will, it also has the power to

illuminate the path in which we should travel. For it is easier for the one who perceives this fire to separate from the evil and unseemly. That is the meaning of what is written that the fire that preceded the nation showed or illuminated the path (Deut. 1:33).

Being that the appearance of fire pointed to Hashem's presence and governance...the prophets prophesied that the time will once again come when Hashem will illuminate before the nation... (Isaiah 60:19-20; Micha 7:9).

Endnote

* There are several millennia-old disputes as to how to divide the Decalogue into ten pronouncements. Most of the controversy centers on how to interpret the first verse, that of "I, Hashem, am your G-d..." Though it is essentially a declarative statement and does not contain an imperative verb, *Targum Yonatan* rendered it as the first commandment, as did several Talmudic and Midrashic Sages, followed by Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ramban and the general tradition. They understand it as requiring the acknowledgment of the existence of Hashem, or the recognition that He alone (with a focus on the meaning of His name) is our G-d. Other Sages and a number of commentators considered the first verse as introductory. Hasdai Crescas, Abarbanel and others presented strong philosophic arguments against the first view. It should be noted that the prohibition against idolatry – with its "You shall not have," "You shall not make," and "You shall not bow to them," does appear to naturally divide into more than one law.

The Masoretic Text, judging from its nine space breaks (all *setumot*, spaces within the line) appears to consider the first verse together with all the idolatry-related verses as

one pronouncement, given that they comprise one block of text. It appears to divide the *lo taḥmod* verses into two commandments with a *setumah* between them in Exodus, while Deuteronomy has one *lo taḥmod* clause and one *lo titaveh*, with a *setumah* between them.

To the extent that it does not significantly affect our comments, we will use the more prevalent division that views the Decalogue's first verse as the first precept, the idolatry prohibitions as the second, and both *lo taḥmod* verses (as well as the *lo taḥmod* and *lo tit'aveh* in Deuteronomy) as the tenth commandment.

The Moment

Rabbi Ezra Labaton

One could argue that the Ten Commandments (or better: Ten Pronouncements or Statements), given on *Har Sinai*, were the most important piece of legislation that the world has ever known. Certainly, it has outlived the ancient law codes of the Mesopotamians, Hittites, and Hammurabi— though these predated the Torah by five to eight hundred years. Is there any law code more famous? These Ten Commandments have formed the basic legislation of the entire Western world and has impacted strongly on at least three billion people (1.2 billion Moslems, 1.8 billion Christians) – fully half of the world’s population. This code has changed the course of world civilization. That moment at *Har Sinai*, celebrated on the Holiday of *Shabuot*, should be seen and appreciated as the most important moment in human history. It is most appropriate to analyze the factors that made this law code and this moment so significant and so impactful.

First, we should point to the Torah’s two internal characterizations of the Ten Commandments. These characterizations will be helpful in understanding why the Ten Commandments were so impactful. *Shemot* 30:15 describes the Ten Commandments as *Luhot Ha-edut*– The Tablets of Testimony. What are the implications of this designation? To what do they serve as witness? One would not be far off the mark in suggesting that these *Luhot* serve as witness to *Bore Olam*’s ongoing involvement and concern with the world He created. Not only is the Almighty the Creator and Sovereign – but He serves as Master Legislator as well. God is concerned enough to provide His creations with a proper legal system with which to govern - a legal system that intends to guide mankind towards a proper Messianic end. Further, this code

of law- based on the Divine word- testifies to the absolute nature of the moral system He legislated. The Israelites, and by extension all of humanity, are to strive to live by these absolute Divine, moral and legal norms. Whether one sees these norms as “Natural law” implicit in the human heart, mind and soul, or as “Revealed legislation,” these norms are rooted in Divine concern about human behavior and the absolute nature of God’s moral legislation. *Har Sinai* testifies to this concern.

As well, *Shemot* 24:7 calls these Ten Commandments *Luhot Ha-berit* – The Tablets of the Covenant. This legislative act is viewed by Torah as a contractual/covenantal agreement between the Creator and the Israelites. We are to become His chosen people and He is to be our God (see *Shemot* 6:7). As a result, we are responsible for bringing these Divine norms to the attention of all others – of sanctifying His Name. God, in turn, will guarantee our ongoing vitality as a nation. “I shall be your God and you shall be My Nation,” underscores the indissoluble bond – the contractual agreement – between the Israelite nation and the God of our forefathers. This everlasting relationship is rooted in the “berit” that was contracted at *Har Sinai*. These two terms, *Luhot Ha-edut* and *Luhot Ha-berit*, serve as the basis of this Divine-human relationship. The Ten Commandments, and this legal system, are the result of this encounter – cemented at *Sinai*. A holy moment indeed.

As such, these Ten Commandments have to be viewed as central in the relationship between *Am Yisrael* and *Haqadosh Barukh Hu*. A violation of the covenant (the golden calf) has to result in the smashing of these tablets (Moshe Rabenu). Here, the violation is viewed not only as disloyalty to God, but also as a violation of one’s contractual/covenantal obligations. No relationship is possible with this sort of violation and disloyalty.

Having established how Torah views these Commandments and their centrality in this Divine/human encounter, we now turn our attention to the geographical and environmental factors that define the moment of this experience. First, we note that the site chosen was the empty, barren desert of *Sinai*. One may raise the question: Why the desert? Why not give the Commandments in this or that country? Here, the Rabbis of the Midrash significantly point out that the desert is open and free to all. No one nation has sovereignty over the desert. So too, the law of *Bore Olam* is free and open to all. Other nations and individuals may avail themselves of the opportunity of binding themselves to the Creator by adopting this set of Divine legislation.

Next, the starkness of the desert is highlighted by the mountain chosen for this event. Unlike the Canaanites who chose the high and mighty *Har Hermon* as their “holy mountain,” and unlike the Greeks who chose Mount Olympus as their “temple of the gods,” *Haqadosh Barukh Hu* chose a small, nondescript mountain – barely noticeable – and immediately forgotten after the event. (Note: There is no intrinsic holiness to this *har* – it’s only God’s presence that sanctifies, and with the withdrawal of that Presence, no sanctity remains.) Even more to the point is the root of the name *Sinai*. The Biblical commentators see this name as rooted in the Hebrew word *sanui* – that which is hated and abandoned by one and all (despite the change in spelling). And the alternate name, *Har Horeb*, derives from the Hebrew word *Hurban* – devastation and destruction. This mountain – not a very pleasant place – did not welcome visitors, nor did it fascinate or attract because of its majestic bearing. God specifically chose this abandoned, avoided, stark, desolate mountain upon which to reveal these Ten Commandments. The focus had to be on the majestic presence of *Bore Olam*, revealing His Divine glory, and not on the mountain itself.

The natural elements also play a role in this revelatory moment. Torah goes out of her way to describe these factors. Thunder and lightning, fire and brimstone, all serve to heighten the tension (Shemot 19:16) and establish the moment as unforgettable. The mountain itself is described as trembling with the presence of the Almighty descending upon the mountain – surrounded by clouds and smoke – all aflame. This moment was intended to last for an eternity and to shape a people into God’s chosen. It had to be awe-inspiring – a spiritually uplifting, overwhelming moment. And it was. Torah records the fear felt by the people and their words begging Moshe to speak, rather than the Creator – *pen-namut* (Per chance we may die). Moshe attempts to allay their feelings of trepidation by noting that this moment was intended to strike a note of fear and trembling into their beings, so that they never conceive of violating the norms of the encounter.

The geography and natural elements all conspire to establish this moment as “The Moment” – a one time event in human history. But it wasn’t enough – more was necessary to establish The Moment. Prominent at the *Har Sinai* experience was the sound of the *shofar* (Shemot 19:16, 19; 20:16). One wonders why? What did this primitive sound symbolize to the Israelites at that moment? What images did it evoke? What feelings did it inspire? Prior to this moment, we don’t have any record at all of the *shofar* as ritually or spiritually important.

Yet, Torah goes out of her way to note again and again how prominent was this sound, along with the thunder that filled the heavens. Did the *shofar* strike fear into their hearts? *Amos* 3:6 asks rhetorically: “Is the *shofar* ever sounded in the city and the people not tremble?” Evidently, at a later time, the *shofar*’s blasting signaled fear. Though this verse is spoken five hundred years after the Sinaitic moment, perhaps the *shofar* played the same role earlier? Or did the blasts of this instrument signal

freedom to the ancient Israelites, as it does on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year? (*Vayiqra* 25:9) Our Torah text does not enlighten us as to any of these options, leaving us guessing as to the true symbolic meaning of the *shofar* – though we are quite sure of its significance.

But this is not all. Along with the geographical, environmental and humanly initiated *shofar* blasts comes Moshe's demand that the people must prepare themselves for the great moment about to be experienced. Proper *hakhana* (preparation) only serves to intensify the feelings of anticipation. First, the people must self-sanctify by washing their clothes (*Shemot* 19:10). Though we are not told why sanctification comes about in this fashion, and why this was significant, perhaps it may be explained as symbolic of a new beginning. Next, they were prohibited from coming close to a woman (*Shemot* 19:15). Here, Moshe had lead them away from any physical sensations. The Moment must be viewed as purely spiritual. The focus is not to be on anything human, but exclusively on the Divine. And then, finally, on the third day, the Moment was to be experienced (*Shemot* 19:11). For the first time in human history, a throng of people – a nation transformed - shall stand witness to what no other nation ever witnessed.

Three thousand three hundred years later, the nation of Israel still commemorates and celebrates The Moment. How could it not? Passed on from that Moment - from father to son and mother to daughter - were the sights seen, the sounds heard, the emotions felt. This Moment was preserved in the collective unconscious heart, mind and soul of this nation.

Our legal system, the ethics and ritual that define us as a people, were all rooted in that Moment at *Har Sinai*. The Ten Commandments established the covenantal relationship between the Almighty and His Chosen Nation. Our task now stands to pass on the power of this Moment to the next

generation, as it is to pass it on to the other member nations of the world – to the Creator’s other children.

The Azharot of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon- An Exercise in Ta'amei Hamitzvot¹

Rabbi Dr. Moshe Sokolow

Preface

This lesson, while planned for *Shavu'ot*, is also intended to be an exercise in categorical thinking, in general, as well as in *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in particular. As such, it can fit into a Jewish philosophy or *mahshevet yisrael* curriculum, as well as into *humash* ('asseret *ha-devarim*) or even medieval Jewish history (apropos of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon) and literature (*piyyut*).

We have once again tried to organize the material in a proven didactic format, and have provided two appendices and a bibliographical note. The first appendix summarizes the Azharot of Sa'adiah Gaon, which are the focus of the lesson, and the second contains the concluding remarks of a very recent essay on the role of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in religious education.

Introduction

In Exodus 24:12, we read:

"And the LORD said to Moshe:	ויאמר ה' אל משה
'Come up to Me on the mountain	עלה אלי ההרה
and wait there;	והיה שם
and I will give you the stone	ואתנה לך את
tablets,	לוחות האבן
with the teachings and	והתורה והמצוה
commandments,	
which I have inscribed to	אשר כתבתי להורותם
instruct them.'"	

¹ This article appeared originally in *Ten Da'at*, A Journal of Jewish Education.

Rashi, in his commentary, discusses the phrase *ha-torah ve-hamitzvah* in its relationship to the *luhot* as if to ask: How can the two stone tablets be described as *ha-torah* when they only contain ten *mitzvot*? He answers:

All 613	כל שש מאות ושלש עשרה
<i>mitzvot</i>	מצוות
are contained in the ten <i>dibberot</i>	בכלל עשרת הדברים הן
And Rav Sa'adiah detailed	ורבינו סעדיה פירש
In the <i>azharot</i> he composed	באזהרות שיסד
for each and every <i>dibbur</i>	לכל דיבור ודיבור
the <i>mitzvot</i> it contains.	מצוות התלויות בו :

Step One: What Are Azharot?

The *azharot* (literally, “warnings”) to which Rashi refers are a form of *piyyut*, liturgical poetry, which was reserved for poems composed for the *musaf* service of *Shavu'ot* and which dealt with the *taryag mitzvot*. One such poem was composed by R. Sa'adiah Gaon (882-942), one of the most outstanding halakhists, exegetes, philosophers, and philologists of the Middle Ages.

The complete text of his *azharot* was published in *Siddur R. Sa'adiah Gaon*, edited by Simcha Assaf and Israel Davidson (Jerusalem, 1970) and is still recited on *Shavu'ot* by some Oriental Jewish communities (e.g., Yemenite). Other Sephardic communities (e.g. Syrian, Spanish and Portuguese) recite the *azharot* of another outstanding poet-philosopher, R. Shelomo Ibn Gabirol.

Here are the opening stanzas of Sa'adiah's *azharot* (p. 191 of the *siddur*):

A blazing fire	אש אוכלה
brighter than the most brilliant	ונוהרות מכל הנוהרות
light;	
and my words are like fire.	ודברי כאש
In its sparks – there are many	וניצוצית הרבה מצוות
<i>mitzvot</i>	

Shining from every <i>dibbur</i>	בכל דיבור זוהרות
With wisdom I gathered	בחכמתי כללתי
in my ten <i>dibberot</i>	בעשרת דברותי
Six hundred thirteen <i>mitzvot</i> ,	שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצוות
Demonstrating that the LORD's	להורות אמרות ה'
utterances	
are recited in purity.	אמרות טהורות

Sa'adiah then proceeds, in rhymed Hebrew verse, to match every one of the 613 *mitzvot* to one or another of the *asseret ha-dibberot* according to their sequence on the *luhot*.

Note: For a detailed, albeit incomplete, distribution of these *mitzvot*, see Appendix A.

Step Two: Objective and Purpose

The objective of this lesson is to challenge the students to sort through selected *mitzvot* and to classify them according to one or another of the ten categories provided by the *'aseret ha-dibberot* – with the *azharot* as an illustration.

Note: We are reluctant to translate *'aseret ha-dibberot* as “the ten commandments,” that is – to use the same English word for *dibberot* which we customarily use for *mitzvot*, because R. Sa'adiah's purpose here is precisely to show how all 613 *mitzvot* are contained herein, and not only 10! A more appropriate translation in this context would be “articles” (as in: *The Articles of Confederation*), but for the sake of clarity and consistency we shall continue to use the Hebrew words: *dibbur* and *dibberot*.

The primary purpose of this lesson is to stimulate the students to study and analyze *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*—that is to say, to evaluate *mitzvot* from the perspective of their philosophical purpose, along with their practical performance. An additional, concurrent purpose is to provide them with an opportunity to show their abilities to organize according to logical categories, and to find adequate and appropriate verbal articulation for those organizing principles.

As *Sefer Mishlei* puts it so eloquently (Proverbs 25:11):

“Like golden apples
in silver showpieces
is a phrase well turned.”

תפוחי זהב
במשכיות כסף
דבר דיבור על אפניו

That is to say: Golden apples, like well-chosen words, are valuable in and of themselves. When they are said at a particularly propitious moment, however, they become even more valuable – set, as it were, in silver showpieces.

Step Three: Didactics

There are several alternative didactic approaches which can be taken to this lesson. We will describe them briefly, and then illustrate the entire lesson by means of the *azharot*. All the approaches recommended here are designed to stimulate active learning and interchanges among the students.

Remember! One of the 48 ways to acquire Torah (as enumerated by hazal in the beraita of kinyan torah) is pilpul ha-talmidim- the give-and-take of students among themselves and with their teacher.

A. The Deductive Approach

One approach is deductive (drawing a specific conclusion from a general proposition), and it consists of: (a) defining the categories represented by each of the

dibberot, and (b) identifying the additional *mitzvot* that belong in each category.

For instance:

1. *anokhi*, the first *dibbur*, can be defined as a public testimony of faith; a perpetual readiness to acknowledge God. Which other *mitzvot* have that goal?
2. *lo yiheyeh lekah* is a stern admonition against idolatry or, if we look at it from another angle, a strenuous reinforcement of the uniqueness and exclusivity of monotheism. Which other *mitzvot* provide that reinforcement?
3. *kabbed* confirms and secures the rights and prerogatives of parents, and – by extension – affirms the need to maintain useful hierarchical social structures (i.e. “Authority”). Which other *mitzvot* address the just regulation of an orderly society?
4. *lo tirtzah* can be extended from the prohibition against murder to all regulations whose goal is the elimination of bloodshed, or the prevention of unnecessary or unwarranted loss of life. Can you think of other *mitzvot* whose objective is to avert such destruction?
5. *lo tin'af* forbids not only adultery, but all forms of public and even private lewdness.
6. *lo tignov* encompasses all the safeguards of private property, along with (perhaps?) the social and ritual obligations which the acquisition of private property imposes.
7. *lo tahmod* can be extended to all *mitzvot* which attempt to impose a discipline upon the senses.

B. The Inductive Approach

An alternate approach is inductive (deriving the general proposition from individual examples), and it consists of: (a) providing a ready-made division of select *mitzvot* according to the *dibberot*, and (b) having the students

identify the organizing principles, or categories, which govern the division.

For instance:

1. If we include *tefillin* and *korbanot* under *anokhi*, what category does it represent?
2. What principle is represented by *lo tisa* if it includes *bal tosif* and *sin'at hinam*?
3. Why is *leshon hara'* included in *lo ta'aneh* rather than in *lo tisa*?

C. The Rhetorical Approach

Or, have the students try to relate select *mitzvot* to each of several *dibberot* categories, until they find the one to which they think it is particularly suited.

For instance:

1. Where would you include *keri'at shema*? In *anokhi*, *lo yiheyeh lekha*, or *zakhor*?
2. Where do the following belong: *yoveil*? *kashrut*? *keli gever*? *Terumot u-ma'asrot*?
3. Which category of the ten *dibberot* do you think contains the most *mitzvot*? The least?

Note: Whichever method you choose, or develop on your own, your objective and purpose remain – as described above – to stimulate your students into creative and reflective analysis of as many mitzvot or categories as your class time will allow.

Appendix A: The Azharot of R. Sa'adiah

The following is a partial listing of *mitzvot*—according to *dibberot*, as they are classified by Sa'adiah.

Note: The rhymed Hebrew verse of the Azharot (see the example we cited in Step One), typical of medieval piyyut, is unusually complex and abstruse, and will challenge the linguistic skills

and ingenuity of even the most erudite reader. Take a stab at it yourself (we cited the publication data earlier) and see how many mitzvot you can identify from Sa'adiah's cryptic poetic allusions to them.

<i>anokhi</i>	80 mitzvot	<i>tzitzit, tefillin, mezuzah, tefillah, korbanot</i>
<i>lo yiheyeh</i>	60	<i>molekh, kishuf, tum'at met, nisu'ei ta'arovet</i>
<i>lo tisa</i>	48	<i>dinim, hakhel, bal tosif, sin'at hinam, tokhehah</i>
<i>zakhor</i>	75	<i>shalosh regalim, shemitah, yoveil, arei leviyim</i>
<i>kabbed</i>	77	<i>milah, pidyon ha-ben, shilu'ah ha-ken, melukhah</i>
<i>lo tirtzah</i>	50	<i>nezikin, ketoret zarah, navi sheker, ma'akeh, bal tashchit, ir ha-nidahat, goneiv nefesh</i>
<i>lo tin'af</i>	58	<i>sotah, yibbum ve-halitzah, geirushin, keli gever, hupah ve-kiddushin</i>
<i>lo tignov</i>	59	<i>sekhar sakhir, shemittat kesafim, moznei tzedek, terumot u-ma'asrot, hasagat gevul, hashavat aveidah</i>
<i>lo ta'aneh</i>	52	<i>derishah ve-hakirah, leshon hara', metzorah ve-tahorato</i>
<i>lo tahmod</i>	54	<i>kashrut, neveilot u-tereifot, oto ve-et beno, gid ha-nasheh, kil'ayim, nazir</i>

Additional Bibliography

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* has an informative article on *ta`amei hamitzvot* entitled: "Commandments; Reasons for," in vol. 5, p. 783 ff. It also lists, in Scriptural order, all *mitzvot `aseh* and *lo ta`aseh* on pp. 763-782. The article closes with a substantial bibliography whose principal entry is an exhaustive 2-volume study by Yosef Heinemann, entitled *ta`amei hamitzvot be-sifrut yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1966).

Psalm 68- The Ark of the Covenant

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Psalm 68 is one of the most impenetrable in Tehillim. The NJPS prefaces its English translation by noting, “The coherence of this psalm and the meaning of many of its passages are uncertain.” It is the only psalm that warrants such a comment. Among its difficulties is that it contains many words that do not appear anywhere else in the Bible and are therefore hard to interpret. We will demonstrate that the key to the psalm lies in understanding its frequent references to the famous celebratory Song of Deborah in Judges 5 which poetically recounts the battle against Sisera. Awareness of this ancient historical backdrop in conjunction with intertextual links will enable us to clarify the obscure imagery, difficult wording, and central themes of the psalm.

We will begin by providing a brief synopsis of Judges 4 and 5.

The Deborah Narrative

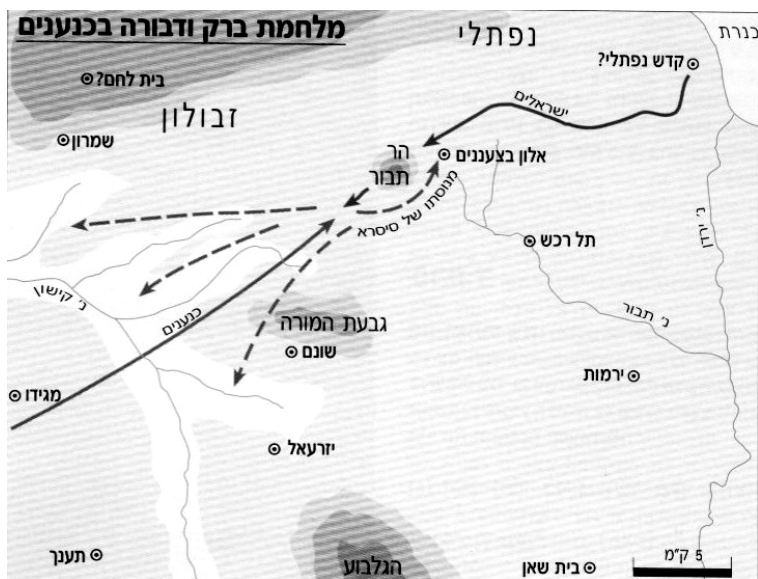
The Song of Deborah is introduced in the chapter preceding it (Judges 4) by a historical recap of the political circumstances in the land, and the Israelites’ ensuing battle with the Canaanite forces (ca. 12th century B.C.E). The story opens on the note that as Israel continued in its sinful ways before G-d, He “sold them off” (v.2) to the Canaanites. The Israelites were severely oppressed by the Canaanites for 20 years. The Canaanites had a powerful army that included 900 iron chariots - תִּשַׁע מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב בְּרֹזָל (Jud. 4:3), the strongest weaponry available, iron being the most expensive metal of the period.

The battle is initiated by Deborah who relays her prophecy to Barak that he must gather an army of 10,000 foot soldiers from Kedesh Naphtali to fight Sisera, a paltry

army compared to the mighty forces of Sisera's chariots. They are directed to the Qishon Wadi where G-d will "hand over" the army of Sisera. Barak congregates the army, and moves south and west of Kedesh Naphtali towards Har Tabor. Meanwhile, Sisera is headquartered at חֶרְשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם (approximately 1650 feet above the narrow valley of Qishon, in a near vertical slope to the valley).¹ When Sisera receives news of the whereabouts of the Israelites he heads northeast along the Qishon River to battle the Israelites. Normally, the Qishon River is a trivial stream that flows through the Jezreel Valley, with a permanent flow only at its western extremity. During the wet season, normally the winter months of November to February, there is a possibility of floods caused by the overflowing of the Qishon Wadi.² Accordingly, a chariot army would not initiate a war during those months when there could be catastrophic consequences. Therefore, this war surely took place during the spring/summer season. (See map from Olam HaTanakh:)

¹ Although the precise location of חֶרְשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם cannot be identified, the approximate location provides a better picture of the stages of the battle. <Baly, Denis. The Geography of the Bible: a Study in Historical Geography. New York: Harper & Row, 1957, pg. 130>

² Mazar, Benjamin, et. al. eds. Illustrated World of the Bible Library. Vol. 2. Jerusalem: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1960, pg. 83



The text then states that G-d cast Sisera and his army into a panic and the mighty chariots were defeated by the Israelites. In Judges 5, we learn that a flash-flood overfilled the Qishon river causing Sisera's chariots that were traveling in the Wadi to be swept away with the water. Sisera then flees by foot with Barak in pursuit. Seeking refuge, Sisera comes to the tent of Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Yael, knowing that Sisera is evil, gives him milk and curds provoking him to fall asleep, affording her the opportunity to kill him with a tent peg. Yael then greets Barak and delivers the body of the dead general to him. This scene then leads into Judges 5 and the Song of Deborah.

With the context of the Judges 4 narrative, which serves as the backdrop for the Song of Deborah, we will now proceed to take note of how the psalmist incorporates the elements and imagery from Deborah's song into Ps. 68.

Psalm 68 and the Song of Deborah

In Ps. 68, the psalmist recounts the events of the Battle at Qishon quoting many phrases from the Song of Deborah. The Song of Deborah is one of five such “songs” in the Bible - the Sea³ (Ex. 15), עלי באר (Num. 21), האזינו (Deut. 32), Deborah (Jud. 5), and דוד (2Sam. 22 - repeated almost verbatim in Ps. 18).

Although Ps. 68 does not have a title that classifies it as a “song” as the other songs do, its unique superscripture⁴ - שיר למנצח לדוד מזמור שיר does contain the word שיר. The same words are found in the superscripture of Ps. 65 with the two middle words inverted. In fact the word שיר (song) is found in all the superscriptures of Pss. 65-68, forming a sub-unit of these psalms, which reach a climactic conclusion in Ps. 68. Aside from the superscripture, the word שיר occurs once as a noun in v. 26 - שרים, and twice more as an imperative verb calling the reader to “sing to G-d...who rides on the clouds” in vv. 5 and 33. Note how v. 33 repeats and elaborates on v. 5’s call to “sing to G-d” forming an envelope with the opening of the psalm⁵.

³ Although we will not attempt to discuss in detail the similarities between Ps. 68, the Song of Deborah, and the Song of the Sea, there are many points of similarity and intertextuality that deserve a study of their own. Some of these similarities include: נצבו to הרים נזלו (Jud. 5:5) to נצבו איש מלחמה (Jud. 5:20) מן שמים נלחמו. כמו גד נזלים (Ex. 15:8) to ארדף אשוי אחלק שכל (Ex. 15:30), הלא ימצאו יחלקו שכל (Ex. 15:9) and ונתת בית תחלק שכל (Ps. 68:13). Ex. 15, Jud. 4-5, and Ps. 68 all contain imagery of chariots and water. In Ps. 68:29 - צנה אלהיך ענך - עונה אלקים זו פעלת לנו; the words זו פעלת, coming within close proximity in the Bible, only occurs once more in Exodus 15 - זו קנית in v. 16 and פעלת in v. 17. Ps. 68:30 references Jerusalem- מהיכלך על - ביהר נחלתך... מקדש אדני - ירושלים, Ex. 15:17 alludes to Jerusalem - ממצלות ים, to Ex. 15:5 - במצלות - ירדו.

⁴ As we demonstrate in our other commentaries (e.g. Ps. 22), superscriptures are an essential tool for analyzing a psalm.

⁵ The general word שמו in v. 5 becomes the specific name אדני in v. 33. סלו in v. 5 shares its consonants with סלה in v. 33 and may also

תהילים 5:68 **שירו לאלקים זמרו** שמו סלו לרכב בערבות בג-ה שמו
ועלזו לפניו :

“Sing to G-d, chant hymns to his name; extol him who rides the clouds; the LORD is his name; exult in his presence.”

תהילים 33:68 **ממלכות הארץ שירו לאלקים זמרו** אד-י סלה :
“O kingdoms of the earth, sing to G-d; chant hymns to the Lord, *selah*.”

In addition to the repeated usage of the root שיר, the joyous scene of the procession welcoming the Aron (the Ark) in Ps. 68:25-26 with singers and musical instruments, conveys the imagery of the celebratory scene we would imagine taking place during Deborah’s recitation of the victory song.

The call to praise G-d in Ps. 68:5 parallels the praise of G-d in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5:3.

תהילים 5:68 **שירו לאלקים זמרו** שמו סלו לרכב בערבות בג-ה שמו
ועלזו לפניו :

שופטים 3:5 **שמעו מלכים האזינו רזנים אנכי לידך אנכי אשירה אזמר**
לידך אלה-י ישראל :

“Hear, O kings! Give ear, O potentates! I will sing, will sing to the LORD, will hymn the LORD, the G-d of Israel.”

share a musical instruction. סלה may mean to strike the final note while סלו is a command to sing. בערבות in v. 5 refers to G-d riding in the clouds, and is the ancient imagery of G-d, paralleling the ancient skies בשמי שמי קדם in v. 34. שמי in v. 34 shares sounds with שמו from v. 5 and may also hint to its meaning, making v. 34 read “to the one who rides with the ancient names” one of which was specified in v. 5 ועלזו לפניו in v. 5 meaning “exult before him [in song]” parallels תנו עז לאלקים in v. 35 meaning “ascribe might to G-d [in song]”. עז shares both of its consonants with עלזו and is often used in conjunction with singing as in Ex. 15:2 and Ps. 59:17-18. An important difference between the two verses is that v. 5 only speaks to the צדיקים, while v. 33 speaks to ממלכות הארץ. We see a build up within the psalm.

In fact, Jud. 5:3 is the only verse outside of Psalms that contains the roots זמר, שיר, and the name of G-d (אלה*ים/הוה) in a single verse. Furthermore, three verses later in Ps. 68 we have an explicit reference to the Song of Deborah. After she proclaims “I will sing to the Lord” she begins the song by recalling how G-d “went out from Seir” - יָדָד בְּצֹאתָךְ מִשְׁעִיר, and “marched from the country of Edom” - בְּצִעְדְךָ מִמְּדֵה אֲדוֹם. The “went out - marched” pair is duplicated in Ps. 68:8 but replaces “fields of Edom” with “the desert”. In addition, there are striking parallels between both texts in the imagery they use of the “earth shaking” - אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה and the “heavens pouring” - שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ. Finally, both use the unique phrase “זֶה סִינִי”, as well as the phrase - מִפְּנֵי יְדָד אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

שופטים 4:5 יָדָד בְּצֹאתָךְ מִשְׁעִיר בְּצִעְדְךָ מִמְּדֵה אֲדוֹם אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה גַם שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַם עָבִים נָטְפוּ מַיִם:

“O LORD, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled; the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water.”

שופטים 5:5 הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי יְדָד זֶה סִינִי מִפְּנֵי יְדָד אֱלֹהֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל: “The mountains quaked- before the LORD, Him of Sinai, before the LORD, G-d of Israel.”

תהילים 68:8 אֱלֹקִים בְּצֹאתְךָ לִפְנֵי עַמְּךָ בְּצִעְדְךָ בִּישִׁימוֹן סֶלָה: “O G-d, when You went at the head of Your army, when You went at the head of Your army, when You marched through the desert, *selah*.”

תהילים 68:9 אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה אֶף שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹקִים זֶה סִינִי מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹקִים אֱלֹהֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“the earth trembled, the sky rained because of G-d, yon Sinai, because of G-d, the G-d of Israel.”

Many are of the opinion that the imagery of the “earth shaking” - אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה in Jud. 5:4 and Ps. 68- references the imagery of the theophany at Sinai - וַיַּחֲרָד כָּל הָהָר מְאֹד “and the whole mountain trembled violently” (Ex. 19:18). While the imagery does bring the theophany at Sinai to mind, the

גם שמים נטפו גם עבים נטפו מים - Jud. 5:4, “the heavens poured the clouds poured water” gives a description of rain that is not associated with the theophany. The description at Exodus 19:16 includes lightening and a description of G-d represented through the עֶן כָּבֵד “dense cloud” (Exodus 19:16); however, there is no literal mention of rain at Sinai. On the other hand, the imagery of a blessed rain comes up repeatedly in Ps. 68, such as in v. 9: אף שמים נטפו מפני אלקים, “the sky poured because of G-d,” and then again in the following verse (10): גשם נדבות תניח אלקים, “You released a bountiful rain.”

This description of rain in Ps. 68 and the Song of Deborah are alluding to the same miraculous rain that G-d brought to the Jezreel valley during the battle at Qishon. In Judges 5:5, Deborah praises G-d and describes how the mountains flowed with water from the rain - הרים נזלו, which is echoed in Ps. 68 vv. 9-10 (גשם נדבות). She later states that the “heavens” fought with Sisera - מן שמים נלחמו (v. 20), and recalls that the Qishon Wadi “swept” Sisera’s chariots - נחל קישון גרפם (v. 21). The reader now gets a clear picture of the great miracle that happened at Qishon where it began to rain in the middle of the dry season! This flash-flood caused the Qishon Wadi to quickly fill with water, thereby drowning and sweeping away Sisera’s army. In Ps. 68 verse 15 the psalmist recounts this miracle, and asserts: בפרש שדג מלכים בה תשלג בצלמון, “When Sh*dai scattered the kings in it, it was like a snowstorm in Zalmon.” Zalmon appears to be a place where it never snows, but with G-d’s miraculous intervention, the impossible becomes a reality – it pours in the middle of the summer. Indeed, without G-d’s intervention the Israelites had no chance of defeating their oppressors; they were fighting a superpower with foot soldiers and limited

weaponry.⁶ With the backdrop of the miraculous rain at Qishon, the psalmist's description of rain in Ps. 68:10 - גֶּשֶׁם וְנָדְבוֹת תִּגְיֵךְ אֱלֹקִים נַחֲלֶתְךָ וְנִלְאַה אֶתָּה כֹּנֶנֶתָהּ – “You released a bountiful rain O G-d; Your land languished, You sustained it” - corresponds well with the Judges account. Perhaps the word נִלְאַה corresponds to the mighty oppression the Canaanites exercised over the Israelites: לַחֲץ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל “and he had oppressed Israel ruthlessly” (Jud. 4:3). The rain that caused the flood is one that is certainly a bountiful donation from G-d - גֶּשֶׁם וְנָדְבוֹת תִּגְיֵךְ and is a “measure for measure” for those who donated to the war effort, described in Jud. 5:2 – בְּהִתְנַדֵּב עָם, “When people dedicate themselves” and Jud. 5:9 - הַמִּתְנַדְּבִים בָּעָם, “with the dedicated of the people.”

Under normal circumstances Sisera's iron chariots were the pride of his army; once G-d initiated the flash flood, however, they became a liability, as the torrential rains quickly filled the Wadi, and bogged down, drowned or swept away the chariots- causing confusion. This is reflected in onomatopoeia that describes the sounds of the horses' hooves as they tried to plod through the muddy waters in the Wadi - אָז הִלְמוּ עֶקְבֵי סוּס מִדְּהֲרוֹת דְּהֲרוֹת אַבִּירָיו - “Then the horses' hoofs pounded as headlong galloped the steeds” (Jud. 5:22). Sisera was forced to flee by foot through the quagmire. The psalmist appears to mock Sisera and the other kings with him in Ps. 68:13 - מַלְכֵי צָבָאוֹת יִדְדוּן יִדְדוּן, “the kings and their armies are in headlong flight” that is, the מַלְכֵי צָבָאוֹת, who are יִדְדוּן (also onomatopoeia), now move very slowly.⁷ Although Sisera may be running at top speed, he is moving slowly.

⁶ As a modern analogy, this war is similar to the wars modern Israel has fought in the 20th century, especially the Independence war – a great miracle considering that the new-born nation was faced with battling all of its Arab neighbors on all sides simultaneously with a paltry army and limited weaponry, yet emerged victorious.

⁷ Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon

In Ps. 68, the story of Israel's victory against the Canaanites is retold using the Song of Deborah as a backdrop. The miracle at Qishon and the defeat of Sisera exemplifies a time in the nation's history where, although faced with extraordinary odds, the nation put their faith in G-d and triumphed over their enemies. The psalmist is writing at a time when the nation finds itself in similarly dire circumstances, and therefore conveys this inspirational message. Here the psalmist will focus on two major aspects of the Deborah narrative: the role of women as the heroines, and G-d's presence in the Aron leading Israel to victory. In the following sections we will analyze each of these two themes separately.

The Heroines

One important theme in Ps. 68 is the central role of women in the narrative. The Judges story is unique in that Deborah, a woman, is not only the prophetess/judge of the nation, but she is also well-respected among the soldiery and their leader. Barak refuses to go to war without her joining him, even though she warns that he will receive no glory with this approach; Sisera will then be delivered to the hands of a woman. Barak, however, is a G-d fearing individual who prioritizes the security of the nation above his own ego, and is willing to forsake his status as the hero of the war (Jud. 4:8-9).

Another woman, not part of the Israelite nation, is also a heroine of the story. During the description of the battle, the text makes an abrupt detour in v. 11 to provide a background note about חֲבֵר הַקֵּינִי and their lineage from Hobab (Moshe's father-in-law). This statement foreshadows the appearance of Yael who is אֵשֶׁת חֲבֵר, noting this as she will continue her family's tradition of acting as allies to the Israelites and doing what is moral. For her bravery and faithfulness to the Israelites, Deborah calls the time period the "Era of Yael" - בְּיַמֵּי יָעֵל (Jud. 5:6), and blesses her from

all the women of the tent - תְּבָרַךְ מְנָשִׁים יַעַל אִשֶּׁת חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי - מְנָשִׁים בְּאֶהֱל תְּבָרַךְ “Most blessed of women be Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of women in tents” (Jud. 5:24). Ps. 68 pays homage to Yael by remarking how a housewife, albeit a courageous and sensitive one, puts her life in danger. Yael could have easily refrained from interceding, but knowing that Sisera is evil, she realizes that she has the opportunity to help the Israelites, and kills Sisera, the mighty general of the Canaanite forces. In Ps. 68:22 a reference is made to Yael’s brave act - “G-d will smash the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks about in his guilt.” In Jud. 5:26 the same words are used to describe how Yael took the peg from the tent and drove it into Sisera’s head.

תהלים 22: 68 אֵךְ אֱלֹקִים יִמְחֹץ רֹאשׁ אִיבֵיו קִדְקֹד שֶׁעַר מִתְהַלֵּךְ
בְּאֶשְׁמִיו :

שופטים 26: 5 יָדָהּ לִצְדָד תִּשְׁלַחְנָה וַיִּמְיֶנָה לְהִלְמוֹת עַמְלִים וְהִלָּמָה
סִיסְרָא מִחֻקָּהּ רֹאשׁוֹ וַיִּמְחָצָה וְהִלָּפָה רַקְתּוֹ :

“Her (left) hand reached for the tent pin, her right for the workmen’s hammer. She struck Sisera, crushed his head, smashed and pierced his temple.”

The psalmist captures the imagery of a young general (later it is his mother who awaits his arrival, not his wife) with a “hairy head filled with guilt.” The use of קִדְקֹד שֶׁעַר plays off of the Judges story, where Sisera, full of his ego and evilness, will end up with his head smashed by a housewife. The psalmist continues this imagery in v. 24 - לְמַעַן תִּמְחֹץ רֵגְלֶךָ בְּדָם - “that your feet may wade through blood.” Blood from Sisera’s head is gushing from the peg that Yael drove through his skull. Now the psalmist recalls how Yael’s feet were soaked in the blood of Sisera.

Another allusion to the Yael and Sisera scene is made by hinting at Sisera’s arrival at Yael’s tent - אֱלֹקִים מוֹשִׁיב יְחִידִים בֵּיתָהּ מוֹצִיא אֲסִירִים בְּכוֹשְׁרוֹת אֵךְ סוֹרְרִים שְׂכָנֵינוּ צָחִיקָה “G-d restores the lonely to their homes, sets free the

imprisoned, safe and sound, while the rebellious must live in a parched land” (Ps. 68:7). Here the word סוֹרְרִים is hinting at Sisera⁸ who came to Yael and asked for a drink, because he was “parched” - צָחִיקָה. Sisera runs to Yael because there is peace between them (Jud. 4:17), but Yael’s true loyalty is to Israel. Upon his arrival at her tent she begins formulating a plot to kill him. In a stroke of brilliance, she gives him milk to drink as well as curds instead of water, making him even drowsier, prompting him to fall asleep, and allowing her to kill him. She takes the tent peg, perhaps the only item fit for the purpose available to her (surely not the ideal weapon), and strikes Sisera dead.

In the Song of Deborah, Yael is contrasted to Sisera’s mother, who is described with vivid imagery. She is standing by the window, peering through the lattice at the distance - בָּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבֵב אִם סִיסְרָא בָּעַד הָאֶשְׁנָב (Jud. 5:28) puzzled at why she does not hear the clatter of her son’s returning chariots - מְדוּעַ בִּשְׁשׁ רֶכֶּבָּו לְבוֹא מְדוּעַ אֶחָרָו - פֶּעַמִּי מְרַכְּבוֹתָיו? She is sure that the battle with the Israelites is an effortless undertaking, therefore she repeats what her “wise” maidens had assured her – Sisera must be at that very moment dividing the Israelite spoils and raping the women. The term used for raping is - רָחַם רַחֲמָתִים לְרֹאשׁ - גָּבַר, “A damsel or two for each man” (Jud. 5:30). The phrase לְרֹאשׁ גָּבַר is only used here in the entire Bible. The word לְרֹאשׁ – “to the head of a man,” appears to be a play on the previously described crushed “head” of Sisera in v. 26. Sisera’s mother and her friends reveling in the rape of captive women is despicable. The vulgar description of the rape as “a womb or two to each man” is abominable. This imagery is immediately contrasted to what actually is

⁸ This is supported by a play on Sisera’s name in Judges 4:18 - וַתִּצָּא זַעַל - לְקִרְיַת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוֹרְרָה אֲדֹנִי סוֹרְרָה אֵלֵי אֵל תִּירָא וַיִּסָּר אֵלָיָהּ הָאֵהָלָה וַתִּכְסְּהוּ בִשְׁמִיקָה, which comes from the same root as סוֹרְרִים.

happening at that moment. Sisera's mother is correct - he is located with a woman, and between the legs of that woman; however, that "hairy head walking in all his guilt" is now lying dead, smashed and bloodied between the legs of Yael! - בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפֶל שָׁכַב, "At her feet he sank, lay outstretched" (Jud. 5:27). The description at Ps. 68:13 highlights the irony. It is not mighty Sisera who is divvying up the loot, but rather - וַיִּנֹּת בֵּית תְּחִלָּק שָׁלָל, a housewife is sharing in the spoils.⁹ Yael, who Deborah praises as "a woman of the tent," מְנַשִּׁים בְּאֹהֶל תְּבָרֶךְ - i.e. a housewife, is holding Sisera's dead body in her tent and now calls Barak to show him the man he seeks.

Furthermore, when Yael approaches Barak who is searching for Sisera their encounter is described as follows - וַהֲנִה בָּרַק רֹדֵף אֶת סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יָעַל לִקְרָאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ יֵלֶךְ - וְאַרְאֶךָ אֶת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה מִבְקֵשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וַהֲנִה סִיסְרָא נָפֶל מֵת וַתֵּצֵא יָעַל לִקְרָאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ, "Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Yael went out to greet him and said, 'Come, I will show you the man you are looking for.' He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple" (Judges 4:22). Aside from this verse, every other occurrence of the phrase וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ in the Bible refers to sexual relations. Of course Yael's encounter with Barak is purely business – she has come to hand over Sisera to the Israelites, but the unusual usage points out the irony. In addition, when the text describes Yael's encounter with Sisera it states - וַתֵּצֵא יָעַל לִקְרָאת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה - אֲדֹנִי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֶל תִּירָא וַיֵּסֶר אֵלֶיהָ הָאֱהָלָה וַתִּכְסְּהוּ בַשְּׂמִיכָה, "Yael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, 'Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.' So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket." (Judges 4:18). It

⁹ Ps. 68:31 reechoes this imagery - בְּרָצִי כֶסֶף בָּזָר עַמִּים קָרְבוֹת יִחְפְּצוּ - tying in with Jud. 5:19 - בָּצַע כֶּסֶף לֹא לָקְחוּ - על מי מגדו. The psalmist may be playing on the irony that those who ran after money - רָצִי כֶסֶף (Sisera) didn't get any - בָּצַע כֶּסֶף לֹא לָקְחוּ.

seems strikingly odd that the text would use the term **אֵלֶיהָ** with Barak, with its sexual implications, when it should have used the words **הָאֵלֶּהָ** as it did with Sisera. It appears that the ambiguity here is purposeful. As we explained, in the Song of Deborah the ambiguous imagery - **בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפֶל שָׁכַב** (5:27) served to highlight the poetic justice of the plot vis-à-vis Sisera and his evil mother. Here this ambiguous term is used with Barak, because in this context the words **וַנִּבֵּא אֵלֶיהָ** certainly do not have the implication it usually does. It is used here instead, as are all the other double entendres in this story, to reveal irony and poetic justice.

Verse 12 of Ps. 68 is another difficult phrase that scholars often grapple with.¹⁰

תהלים 68:12 אֲדֹנָיִי יְתֵן אֱמֶרֶת הַמַּבְשָׁרוֹת צָבָא רַב:

The NJPS translates: “The Lord gives a command; the women who bring the news are a great host.” With the backdrop of the battle in Judges 4-5, this otherwise difficult verse fits perfectly with the rest of the psalm. It is not any women bringing news, but the news that the two heroines, Yael and Deborah, brought to Barak regarding the war.¹¹ The **אֱמֶרֶת** is referring to G-d’s prophecy to Deborah to gather an army and fight Sisera –

שופטים 4:6 וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לְבָרַק בֶּן אֲבִינֵעַם מִקֵּדֶשׁ נִפְתָּלִי וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
הֲלֹא צֹנָה יְדֹנָד אֵלֶּהָ־יִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ וּמִשְׁכַּת דְּבָרָה תָּבוֹר וְלִקְחֹתָ
עִמָּךְ עֲשָׂרֹת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי נִפְתָּלִי וּמִבְּנֵי זָבֻלֹן:

¹⁰ Robert Alter calls verse 12 an “obscure verset.” All other translations mistranslate this verse as well.

¹¹ Note that the war imagery in Ps. 68 is also supported by other later verses we will comment on. Ps. 68:30 states - **מִהִיכָלְךָ עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם לָךְ** - **יֹבִילוּ מְלָכִים שִׁי**. The words **יֹבִילוּ...שִׁי** appear only once more in Tehillim in Ps. 76:12 - **יֹבִילוּ שִׁי** - **כָּל סִבְיָכָיו אֵלֶּהָ־יִכָּם** - **נָדְרוּ וְשָׁלְמוּ לְדֹנָד אֵלֶּהָ־יִכָּם** - **לְמוֹרָא**. Both psalms recall previous battles: Ps. 68 with the battle against Sisera and Ps. 76 against Aram.

“She summoned Barak son of Abinoam of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, ‘The LORD, the G-d of Israel, has commanded: Go march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun.”

Deborah relays her prophecy to Barak in which she was commanded - **צְנֵה יְדִיד** to gather a large army, the 10,000 soldiers from Naphtali and Zebulun that Barak will muster to fight the 900 chariots of Sisera - the **צָבָא רָב**. Ps. 68:29 alludes to the commandment G-d gave Deborah with - **צְנֵה** **אֱלֹקֶיךָ עֲזָךְ עֹזָה אֱלֹקִים זֶו פָּעֲלָתָ לָנוּ**, “Your G-d has ordained strength for you, the strength, O G-d, which You displayed for us”. At the end of the war, Yael also brings news regarding the **צָבָא**, telling Barak that Sisera has been killed.

שופטים 22:4 וְהָיָה בְּרֹךְ רִדְף אֶת סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא וַעַל לְקָרְאֵתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָךְ וְאֶרְאֶךָ אֶת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה מִבְקֵשׁ וְנִבְּאָה אֵלָיָה וְהָיָה סִיסְרָא נָפֵל מֵת וְהִיתָד בְּרַקְתּוֹ :

Notice that the same words **וַתֹּאמֶר** and **לָךְ** are used to describe the news Yael and Deborah brought. These two women are contrasted to Sisera's evil mother who tells herself that her son is probably raping and pillaging the village, using the root **אמר**.

שופטים 29:5 חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָהּ אִף הִיא תִשָּׁב **אִמְרֶיהָ** לָהּ :
 “The wisest of her ladies give answer; she, too, replies to herself.”

In Ps. 68, a reference is made to Izebel, the evil queen, further contrasting Deborah and Yael with evil women. Verse 24 describes- **לְמַעַן תִּמְחֹץ רִגְלֶךָ בְּדָם לְשׁוֹן כְּלָבֶיךָ מֵאֵיבִים** - **מִנְהוּ** “that your feet may wade through blood; that the tongue of your dogs may have its portion of your enemies.” Similarly, In 2 Kings, Izebel is cursed that the horses will trample her blood **וַיִּזְ מַדְמָה אֶל הַקִּיר וְאֶל הַסּוּסִים וַיִּרְמְסֶנָּה** - **יֹאכְלוּ הַכְּלָבִים אֶת** (9:33) and that the dogs will eat her flesh **בְּשָׂר אִיזֶבֶל** (9:36).

To summarize, until this point, we have clarified some of the difficult phrases in Ps. 68 by examining the Judges 4-5 story and placing it as the backdrop for this psalm. The association between the two texts allows us to recognize a thematic flow in the psalm, focusing on praise for the great miracle at Qishon and recalling the bravery of the heroines in the story.

The Ark

The major theme in Ps. 68 is the imagery of the Aron (the Ark) containing the tablets. In this section we will explain how the Aron is symbolic of G-d's presence, and how the Numbers 10 context, the Judges narrative, and Ps. 68 share the common theme of G-d represented by the Aron battling Israel's enemies, using similar imagery and words to convey this theme.

The opening of Ps. 68 makes an explicit reference to Numbers 10 where the Aron leads the nation into battle –

תהלים 68: 2 יְקוֹם אֱלֹקִים יִפּוּצוּ אוֹיְבָיו וַיָּנוּסוּ מִשְׁנֵאָיו מִפְּנֵיו :

“G-d will arise, his enemies shall be scattered, his foes shall flee before Him.”

במדבר 10: 35 וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעַ הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה יְדֹד וַיִּפְּצוּ אוֹיְבֶיךָ וַיָּנוּסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֶיךָ מִפְּנֶיךָ :

“When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance (Rise), O LORD! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!”

The Numbers imagery represents the earliest stage of G-d conquering His enemies during Israel's travels through the wilderness as well as in the conquest of Canaan. When the Israelites would go into battle, the Aron would precede the soldiers - וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעַ הָאָרֶץ. As the troops would march forward into the battlefield, Moshe would pray, summoning G-d to rise – קוּמָה – and scatter his enemies - וַיִּפְּצוּ אוֹיְבֶיךָ, from before him – מִפְּנֶיךָ. When the Aron was stationed, Moshe would recite the rest of the prayer (v. 36) - וּבִנְחָה

יִשְׂרָאֵל - that G-d should return all the soldiers back safely from the battle.

In Judges 4:14 Deborah summons Barak to battle –

וַתֹּאמֶר דְּבֹרָה אֶל בָּרַק קוּם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְדֹנָד אֶת סִיסְרָא בְיָדְךָ
הֲלֹא יְדֹנָד יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיךָ וַיִּרְדּוּ בָרַק מִהָר תְּבוֹר וַיַּעֲשֶׂת אֱלֹהִים אִישׁ אַחֲרָיו:
“Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up (Rise)! This is the day on which the LORD will deliver Sisera into your hands: the LORD is marching before you.’ Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men.”

Barak is summoned using the same verb as in the prayer Moshe recites to summon for G-d to rise and scatter his enemies in Numbers 10:35 – קוּם. Deborah then says that G-d is going out before him יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיךָ, similar to the statement in Numbers 10:35 - וַיֵּצֵא מִשְׁנֵאֵיךָ מִפָּנֶיךָ, where the Aron metaphorically goes out from before G-d and scatters his enemies. While Deborah's words are meant to encourage Barak, ensuring him that G-d will bring victory to the nation, she is also reminding him that G-d, represented by the Tablets in the Aron, is going to lead the Israelites into battle. Presence of the Tablets recalls the battles in the desert when the Israelites were a new nation and put their faith in G-d. Now, as Barak and his army face a battle against an enemy much stronger than they, Deborah reminds Barak that these are the same Tablets and Aron, meaning G-d that fought for the nation in the past will surely fight again. Ps. 68 recalls the historic Canaanite battle, and the backdrop of the battles against Israel's oldest enemies as a hopeful vision that G-d will continue to fight for Israel like he had done in the past. The imagery of G-d scattering Israel's enemies - יַפְּצֹצוּ (v. 2) is repeated again later in Ps. 68.

תהלים 68: 15 בִּפְרֹשׁ שְׂדֵי-י מְלָכִים בָּהּ תִּשְׁלַג בְּצִלְמוֹן:

“When Sh*ddai **scattered** the kings, it seemed like a snowstorm in Zalmon” (or metaphorically speaking, if necessary He will make it snow in summer.)

תהלים 31: 68 גֵּעַר חַיַּית קִנָּה עַדַּת אֲבִירִים בְּעֻגְלֵי עַמִּים מִתְרַפֵּס בְּרֹצֵי
 קֶסֶף בְּזֵר עַמִּים קִרְבוֹת יַחְפָּצוּ:

“Blast the beast of the marsh, the herd of bulls among the peoples, the calves, till they come cringing with pieces of silver. **Scatter** the peoples who delight in wars!”

The prayer for return of the soldiers from Numbers 10:36 - שׁוּבָה יְדֹנֵד רִבְבוֹת אֶלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - is alluded to in Ps. 68 as well. In v. 23, G-d is described as saying He will return (the soldiers) from Bashan and the depths of the sea - מִבָּשָׁן מִמְצָלוֹת יָם אָשִׁיב אָשִׁיב doubling the word אָשִׁיב (return) which comes from the same root as the word שׁוּבָה in the prayer at Numbers 10. The reference to Bashan, the mountainous area immediately East of Hazor, which may also include Hazor, is mentioned in Jud. 4:2 - וַיִּמָּכְרֵם יְדֹנֵד “And the LORD surrendered them to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. His army commander was Sisera, whose base was Harosheth-goiim.” The “depth of the waters” - מִמְצָלוֹת יָם, refers to the overflowed Qishon Wadi (Jud. 5:21). Similar to Moshe’s prayer in the desert, the psalmist recalls how G-d returned the Israelites during the war with Canaan, both those who fled to the Bashan mountains, escaping the oppressive Canaanites, as well as the Israelite soldiers who fought in the Qishon Wadi. In addition, in Ps. 68:18 G-d’s chariots are described as being “myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands” - רָכֶב אֱלֻקִּים רַב־תַּיִם אֶלְפֵי שָׁנָן - This recalls the words in Num. 10:36 - רִבְבוֹת אֶלְפֵי - , where Moshe prays that the myriads of thousands of Israelites be returned from battle. The psalmist uses the Numbers reference to make a sharp contrast to the description of Sisera’s 900 chariots, which of course cannot compare to G-d’s chariots.

The intertextual references between these three are striking. In Numbers 10:29, directly preceding the description of the Aron going out to battle, there is a short account of Moshe’s dialogue with Hobab (his father-in-law).

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֵתִן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְדֹנָד אֲתוֹ אֵתָּן לָכֶם לָכֶה אִתָּנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי יְדֹנָד דִּבֶּר טוֹב עַל
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses’ father-in-law, “We are setting out for the place of which the LORD has said, ‘I will give it to you.’ Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the LORD has promised to be generous to Israel.”

This is followed by -

וַיְהִי בְנִסְעֵ הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוֹמָה יְדֹנָד וְנִצְצוּ אִיְבֵיךָ וְיִנָּסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֵיךָ
מִפָּנֶיךָ:

Shortly prior to Deborah summoning Barak to battle, we find a one-verse digression about the Heber clan, which as stated, foreshadows the heroic acts of Yael.

שופטים 11:4 וְחֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי נִפְרָד מִקֵּין מִבְּנֵי חֹבָב חֵתִן מֹשֶׁה נָיִט אָהָלוֹ עַד
אֵלוֹן בְּצַעֲנָנִים אֲשֶׁר אֶת קֶדֶשׁ:

“Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, descendants of Hobab, father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent at Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh.”

This is followed by -

שופטים 14:4 וַתֹּאמֶר דִּבְרָה אֶל בָּרַק קוּם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְדֹנָד
אֶת סִיסְרָא בְיָדְךָ הֲלֹא יְדֹנָד יֵצֵא לִפְנֶיךָ וַיִּרְדּוּ בָרַק מֵהָר
תְּבוֹר וַעֲשֶׂרֶת אֱלָפִים אִישׁ אַחֲרָיו:

Similar to the Numbers 10 context and Judges 4, Ps. 68 opens on a reference to קוֹמָה יְדֹנָד and then alludes to Yael, a descendent of Hobab. This seeming pattern further suggests that these intertextual references are purposeful, all focusing on the imagery of the Aron from Numbers.

Psalm 68 contains extensive imagery of the Aron. The opening reference to the Numbers description of the Aron, with G-d’s enemies fleeing “before him” – מִפָּנָיו in v. 2, is expanded upon in subsequent verses. The root פָּנִי occurs eight times in the eight verses between verses 2 and 9: מִפָּנָיו (v. 2); מִפָּנֵי אֵשׁ (v. 3); מִפָּנֵי אֱלֹקִים (v. 4); לִפְנֵי אֱלֹקִים (v. 5); וְעִלְזוּ לִפְנָיו (v. 6); מִפָּנֵי אֱלֹקִים (v. 7); מִפָּנֵי אֱלֹקִים בְּצִאתָךְ לִפְנֵי (v. 8); מִפָּנֵי אֱלֹקִים (v. 9). Each time it is used with

G-d's name or referring to Him. These repeated usages are extensions of its usage in v. 2 with the imagery of the Aron from Numbers 10, where the word פָּנִי is used to describe the enemies fleeing before G-d- מִפְּנֵיךָ מִשְׁנָאֵיךָ מִפְּנֵיךָ. These eight repetitions highlight that G-d, represented in the Aron which contains the Tablets from Sinai, is going before the nation. In v. 25, there is an explicit reference to G-d being in the holy - רָאוּ הַלְיכוֹתֶיךָ אֱלֹקִים הַלְיכוֹת אֱ-לִי מִלְכִּי בִקְדֹשׁ "Men see Your processions, O G-d, the processions of my G-d, my king, into the sanctuary." The psalmist, once again stresses G-d's presence represented by the Aron.

Ps. 68:19 uses imagery of the Aron fighting Israel's battles recalling the battle in Judges 4-5.

תהלים 68:19 **עֲלִיתָ לְמָרוֹם שְׁבִית שְׁבִי** לְקַחְתָּ מִתְּנוֹת בְּאָדָם וְאֵף סוֹרְרִים לְשָׂכֵן יֵ-הָ אֱלֹקִים:

"You went up to the heights, having taken captives, having received tribute of men, even of those who rebel against the LORD G-d's abiding there."

שופטים 10:4 **וַיִּזְעַק בָּרַק אֶת זְבוּלֹן וְאֶת נַפְתָּלִי קְדֹשָׁה וַיַּעַל בְּרָגְלָיו עֲשָׂרַת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ וַתַּעַל עִמּוֹ דְּבוֹרָה:**

"Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh; ten thousand men marched up after him; and Deborah also went up with him."

שופטים 18:5 **וַיְבָלוּ עִם חֶרֶף נִפְשׁוּ לְמוֹת וַנִּפְתָּלִי עַל מְרוֹמֵי שָׂדֶה:** "Zebulun is a people that mocked at death, Naphtali – on the open heights."

שופטים 12:5 **עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי דְבוֹרָה עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי דְבָרִי שִׁיר קוֹם בָּרַק וַיִּשְׁבָּה שְׁבִיךְ בֶּן אֲבִינוֹם:**

"Awake, awake, strike up the chant! Arise, O Barak; take your captives, O son of Abinoam."

In Ps. 68:19 the phrase עֲלִיתָ לְמָרוֹם is used to capture the idea of the Aron going up Mount Tabor with the Israelites.¹²

¹² Although Mount Tabor is not a very high mountain, it is higher than the surrounding mountains and is a strategically important location. (Harpers Bible Dictionary).

While in the psalm it is the Aron that went up למרום in Jud. 5:18 Barak is על מרומי שדה. The textual link is especially striking since the phrase שביית שבי occurs only in this psalm and in Jud. 5:12 (aside from Deut. 21:10 - the law of the woman taken captive in battle).

Beyond the psalm's description of the Aron representing G-d going forth in battle, the Aron is introduced in verse 5 with the imagery of being the "chariot of G-d." That verse extols G-d as the one who "rides the clouds," - לרכב בערבות. With the backdrop of Judges 4-5, it is evident that this imagery was not used solely for poetic purposes, but is another allusion to the miracle at Qishon, where G-d brought rain from the "clouds." The imagery of the chariot appears again in v. 18 - רכב אלקים רבתיים as well as in v. 34 - לרכב בשמי שמי קדם, non-literally translated as "Him who rides the ancient highest heavens." This imagery is also found in Deut. 33:26 - "O Jeshurun, there is none like G-d, riding through the heavens to help you, through the skies in His majesty" - רכב שמים בעזרך. ובגאותו שחקים. In Ps. 18:11, the imagery of the Aron, specifically serving as G-d's chariot is used - וירכב על כרוב - ויעף ויגדא על כנפי רוח, "He mounted a cherub and flew, gliding on the wings of the wind." The cherubim, that rest on the *kaporet* on the Aron, are described metaphorically as the "chariot" of G-d, using the same imagery of riding through the skies used twice in Ps. 68.

The most striking statements regarding the Aron are found in Psalm 68:9,18 and Judges 5:5.

תהלים 68:9 ארץ רעשה אף שמים נטפו מפני אלקים זה סיני מפני אלקים אלה-י ישראל:

תהלים 68:18 רכב אלקים רבתיים אלפי שגאן אדני-י בם סיני בקדש:
שופטים 5:5 הרים נזלו מפני ידוד זה סיני מפני ידוד אלה-י ישראל:

In the Song of Deborah, she recalls the events of the war describing the rain dripping down the mountain from the overflowed Qishon, with the words מפני ידוד flanked on

both sides of the statement **זֶה הָאֵלֹהִים**. Once more, the **מִפְּנֵי** recalls the imagery of the Aron, only here a stunning play on words is made with the words **זֶה הָאֵלֹהִים**. Deborah is stating that the miracles happened because of G-d's presence with the Aron, followed by a demonstrative phrase - this is Sinai! To what is Deborah pointing when she says "this" is Sinai- the mountain where Israel received the Tablets? As Rabbi S. D. Sassoon taught us, Deborah is pointing to the Aron, more specifically to the Tablets, which are from Sinai, carved from the mountain itself! Thus, Deborah's statement to Barak that the Aron is joining him is exceptionally inspiring. She relates to him that the Aron accompanying him to battle contains the original Tablets handed down from Moshe! The presence of the original Tablets represents an unbroken chain of tradition that G-d will come through for the nation. The Jud. 5:5 verse is repeated almost verbatim in Ps. 68:9. In v. 18, the psalmist describes G-d's chariot - **רָכַב אֱלֹהִים**, which is imagery of the Aron, and states that G-d is among them, Sinai are in them. When recalling the ancient war, the psalmist recalls G-d's presence in the nation, as seen by the fact that the Tablets given at Sinai were in the Holy (Aron). Moreover, there is a structural connection between the two **הָאֵלֹהִים** phrases of vv. 9 and 18: there are exactly 80 words from the **זֶה** of v. 9 to the **בְּקֶדֶשׁ** of v. 18. As we have seen throughout Tehillim, the number eight and its multiples represent the covenant. The 80-word span is very appropriate structural symbolism as the **הָאֵלֹהִים** phrases both represent the Ark of the Covenant.

We can now understand one of the most difficult verses in Ps. 68. The NJPS tortuously translates v. 14 as "even for those of you who lie among the sheepfolds there are wings of a dove sheathed in silver, its pinions in fine gold." The first part of the verse alludes to our Judges context:

תהלים 14: 68 אִם תִּשְׁכְּבוּן בֵּין שְׂפָתַי: כִּנְפֵי יוֹנָה נִחְפָּה בַּכֶּסֶף וְאַבְרוֹתֶיהָ בִּירְקָרֶק חֲרוֹץ:

שופטים 16: 5 לָמָּה יֵשְׁבֶת בֵּין הַמִּשְׁפָּתִים לִשְׁמֹעַ שְׂרָקוֹת עֲדָרִים לַפְּלֹגוֹת רְאוּבוֹן גְּדוֹלִים חִקְרֵי לֵב:

“Why then did you stay among the sheepfolds and listen as they pipe for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben were great searching of heart!”

In that verse Deborah rebukes the tribe of Reuben: “Why did you stay within your borders listening to the bleating of the flocks”? Reuben (the firstborn who made the commitment to Moshe to fight alongside his brothers) remained on the sidelines as his brothers went to war. In contrast to Reuben who “sat by,” Deborah commends the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali who were the main forces fighting Sisera - זֶבֻּלוֹן (Jud. 4:6) and מִנַּחֲנֵי וְנַפְתָּלִי וּמִנַּחֲנֵי וְזֶבֻּלוֹן (Jud. 5:18). The psalmist likewise praises the tribes who were involved in the war effort against the Canaanites, specifically mentioning Zebulun and Naphtali (v.28).

The אִם תִּשְׁכְּבוּן בֵּין שְׂפָתַי statement appears to be a double entendre of sorts. While we think of the rebuke of Reuben, the continuation of the phrase redirects our thoughts. The “wings of a dove covered with silver and whose pinions are covered with gold” is a reference to the old imagery of the Aron and Cherubim. Ps. 68 draws much of its imagery from the ancient conception of G-d and the Aron. Verse 14 plays off of the rebuke of Reuben who stayed “in their borders” to now mean “if you stay **within** the borders/edges of the Aron,” or rather, “if you fulfill the words of the prophecy that ensues from between the Cherubim.” Reuben chose to stay within his borders, perhaps lacking the faith that G-d would save Israel from the Canaanites. Now the psalmist uses these charged words to inspire the nation with the hopeful vision that “if you abide under G-d’s protection [with full commitment],” as the nation had in the past and had been victorious, G-d will

come through once again.¹³ The results will then be as spectacular as a snowstorm in the summer as described in Ps. 68:15 - בִּפְרֹשׁ שָׁדַי-י מְלָכִים בָּה תִּשְׁלַג בַּצִּלְמוֹן. In addition, there appears to be a poetic play on the phrase as the syllables have a chiasitic structure - **אם תִּשְׁכַּבּוּ בֵּין שַׁפְתֵּי**. Here, the center consonants ב and ן are back-to-back, so to speak, the word “between” – בֵּין is found at the center of the chiasm (“in-between” the chiasm). The play on the middle letters then means that if the nation upholds what is in the middle of the wings of the cherubim, i.e. the covenant, G-d will protect them as he had in the past.

As Ps. 68 comes to its conclusion, the imagery of the Aron leading the victorious warriors returning from battle inspires the psalmist to burst out in repeated blessing to G-d, recalling Deborah’s repeated blessings when she praises G-d in her song. The בִּרְךְ in imperative form followed by G-d’s name is very rare; aside from Ps. 103, it occurs only in Ps. 68:27 and Jud. 5:2,9.

תהלים 20: 68 בִּרְוַךְ אֲדֹנָי-י יוֹם יוֹם יַעֲמֹס לָנוּ הָאֵל-יִשׁוּעַתָּנוּ סֵלָה :
 תהלים 27: 68 בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת בִּרְכוּ אֱלֹקִים אֲדֹנָי-י מִמְקוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל :¹⁴
 תהלים 36: 68 נוֹרָא אֱלֹקִים מִמְקֹדֶשֶׁיךָ אֵל-יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא נִתָּן עֹז וְתַעֲצֻמוֹת
 לְעַם בְּרוּךְ אֱלֹקִים :
 שופטים 2: 5 בִּפְרָע פְּרָעוֹת בִּישְׂרָאֵל הִתְנַדֵּב עִם בִּרְכוּ יְדֹנָד :
 שופטים 9: 5 לְבִי לְחוּקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִמְתַּנְּדָּבִים בָּעִם בִּרְכוּ יְדֹנָד :

The return of the Aron from battle is accompanied by a

¹³ This is similar to Ps. 91:1 and Ps. יֵשֶׁב בְּסִתְרָ עֲלֵיוֹן בַּצִּל שָׁדַי יִתְלוֹן - 91:1 and Ps. 91:4 בְּאַבְרָתוֹ יִסֹּךְ לָךְ וְתַחַת כְּנָפָיו תִּחְסֶה .

¹⁴ Ps. 68:27 shows some parallelism to Jud. 5:9-11.

תהלים 27: 68 בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת בִּרְכוּ אֱלֹקִים אֲדֹנָי-י מִמְקוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל :
 שופטים 9: 5 לְבִי לְחוּקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִמְתַּנְּדָּבִים בָּעִם בִּרְכוּ יְדֹנָד :
 שופטים 10: 5 רִכְבֵּי אֶתְנֹת צְהֻרוֹת יֹשְׁבֵי עַל מְדִין וְהִלְכִי עַל דֶּרֶךְ שִׁיחוּ :
 שופטים 11: 5 מִקּוֹל מַחֲצִיִּים בֵּין מִשְׁאֲבִים שֶׁם יִתְּנוּ צִדְקוֹת יְדֹנָד צִדְקַת פְּרוֹנוֹ
 בִּישְׂרָאֵל אִזּוֹ רָדוּ לְשַׁעְרִים עִם יְדֹנָד :

רִכְבֵּי אֶתְנֹת צְהֻרוֹת יֹשְׁבֵי עַל מְדִין וְהִלְכִי and הִמְתַּנְּדָּבִים expands to בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת means the history of Israel, the early times when it became a nation. מִמְקוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל (Jud. 5:9-11) and מַחֲצִיִּים על דֶּרֶךְ also alludes to Jud. 5:11 “מִשְׁאֲבִים.”

parade in G-d's honor, along with singers, musicians, dancers, and maidens playing timbrels all adding to the joyous scene -

תהלים 68: 26 קדמו שרים אחר נגנים בתוך עלמות ותופות:
 “First come singers, then musicians, amidst maidens playing timbrels.”

The blessings turn into intense praise of G-d in vv. 33-35. Verse 36 concludes Ps. 68 with a recap of the major themes in the psalm. It opens with an allusion to the Aron, i.e. G-d in his holy dwelling - נורא אלקים ממקדשיו. Next is the statement that G-d gives strength to the nation - הוא נתן עז ותעצמות לעם, and then closes on the note of a blessing with the 26th occurrence of Elokim in the psalm.

תהלים 68: 5 שירו לאלקים זמרו שמו סלו לרכב בערבבות בנה שמו ועלו לפניו:
 תהלים 68: 33 ממלכות הארץ שירו לאלקים זמרו אדני סלה:
 תהלים 68: 34 לרכב בשמי שמי קדם הן יתן בקולו קול עז:
 תהלים 68: 35 תנו עז לאלקים על ישראל גאנתו ועזו בשחקים:
 תהלים 68: 36 נורא אלקים ממקדשיו אל-ל ישראל הוא נתן עז ותעצמות לעם ברוך אלקים:

Conclusion

The inspirational message of Ps. 68, given that סנה סיני refers to the Tablets of the Ark of the Covenant, is especially apropos to Shabu'ot when we commemorate the giving of the Ten Commandments. The Torah makes a point that it is the Ten Commandments that are inscribed on the Tablets¹⁵. Deborah the judge who led the nation is referred to as אשה נביאה אשת לפידות. Her name is of course a play on דבר – “the Word,” alluded to in the song of Deborah – עורי עורי דבורה עורי עורי דברי (Jud. 5:12). She is first and foremost a prophetess who brings the word of G-d to the nation. She also is the wife of לפידות – “torches” –

¹⁵ Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13, 10:4

which provides an additional description of her. The word of G-d is often referred to as אֵשׁ- “fire”- and in her case she symbolizes the dimension of giving inspiration. The name of Barak, the military leader, translates as “lightening,” another form of fire. He refuses to battle until accompanied by the one who brings the “Word” of G-d. Thus, the story represents the time when the nation put its faith in G-d, focused on the Tablets of the Ark - בֵּין שְׁפָתַיִם כְּנָפֵי יוֹנָה - and in the message that ensued from it. Today, after wandering through the “מִדְבַּר הָעַמִּים” “the wilderness of the nations” (Ez. 20:35) for 2000 years, the nation of Israel has been blessed with the wondrous miracle of returning to its land. Many have tried and are trying to destroy Israel but G-d has performed miracle upon miracle. We pray that He will continue to protect us as He did in the past.

Reflections on Megillat Ruth

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

1. Introduction

Megillat Ruth is a superbly-crafted short story possessing all the elements of great literature. While sparing of descriptive detail, it contains a consistently charming, idyllic setting, astutely portrayed characters, deft dialogue, dramatic use of tension in scenes of subtle expectation, disappointment and felicity, and a profusion of rich, potent allusions. On the surface it is an example of G-d's reward for righteous behavior, specifically that of *hesed*, and illustrates how with such behavior one may rise from the most humble state to royal heights, providing thereby messages of profound and universal import. It also possesses a metaphoric dimension that transmits hope and inspiration to a nation in despair. This very possibly was the reason for its composition and inclusion in Scripture, a matter we shall discuss later in the study.

On the basic narrative level, the Megillah describes the trials and tribulations of Ruth, a young Moabite woman of excellent character, who possessed a remarkable degree of love and devotion to her deceased husband's family, particularly to her widowed and bereaved mother-in-law. It depicts her courageous, unwavering decision to forsake her family, nation and god to remain with her mother-in-law and join Israel and its G-d, despite the significant hardships and stigma that were involved in doing so. This was particularly exceptional as she had not had any children.

Although not a word is said concerning her personal considerations in making such a life-altering decision, one cannot ignore the message transmitted between the lines. She obviously had a Moabite family to which she could have returned. Naomi had continually advised, even urged,

her to do so, and Boaz acknowledged this in his expression of admiration for her decision to leave father and mother to join a people she had not known before. But she obviously had been deeply and compellingly impacted by the family she married into, despite it having separated from its patrimony and intermarried with Moabites. In light of the problems she would be expected to face as a Moabite in Israel, her choice is an impressive testimony to her appreciation of the merit of Israel's heritage, essentially its G-d and His Torah, as Boaz remarked concerning her decision, referring to her relationship with the G-d of Israel, "that you have come to take refuge under His wings" (Ruth 2:12). Ultimately, she is rewarded with marriage and progeny from which stem Israel's national royal family.

In illustrating how the most glorious outcome may result from humble and alien origins, provided there is sincerity, goodness and perseverance, the Megillah is an important commentary on the Torah. Underlying the narrative is the theme of G-d's behind-the-scenes involvement, influencing events to help the righteous succeed in pursuing their worthy goals. But there is much more as we shall discuss in due course.

2. Allusions to Abraham and Yishaq

Ruth's extraordinary comportment is given fuller meaning, indeed, momentous significance, by the author's rich allusions to events in the lives of Abraham and Yishaq. Parallels are drawn between Hashem's לך-לך call to Abraham to leave his father's home to proceed to the Promised Land - a foundational act in establishing the nation of Israel - and Ruth's doing so. The account of Divine Providence at work in Abraham's servant successfully finding the appropriate wife for Yishaq is the backdrop to Ruth's meeting Boaz and the preliminaries that eventually lead to their marrying. We will survey the linkage, pointing out how extensive it is.

G-d's selection of Abraham entails the test of Abraham taking leave of land, kinfolk and father's home to go to a land he does not know - לְךָ-לָךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלֶדֶת וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ - אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ (Gen. 12:1). Ruth's decision to attach herself to Naomi contains similar elements and is described in strikingly comparable language. When Naomi tried to dissuade her daughters-in-law from accompanying her from Moab to Judah, she said: לָכֵנָה שׁוּבְנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּהּ "go, return, each to her mother's home" (Ruth. 1:8). As a woman speaking to women to return home, the more emotional-laden "mother's home" is substituted for the more technically-correct "father's home." Ruth's response includes לְךָ-לָךְ אֶל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אִלָּךְ (v. 16). She continues with a comprehensive commitment to the nation of Israel and its G-d, corresponding to Abraham's response- silent but nonetheless salient - in hearkening to the Divine call to go to a land he does not know. Later, Boaz strikes similar notes in commending Ruth for וַתַּעֲזְבִי וְאִבֶּיךָ וְאִמֶּךָ וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלֶדֶתְךָ וַתֵּלְכִי אֶל-עַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתָּ, "you left father, mother and land of your birth and moved to a nation you did not previously know" (ibid. 2:11).

When Abraham's servant - on his mission to find a wife for Yishaq - arrived at his destination, he was נִצָּב, "standing watchfully" at the well from which the town's young ladies drew water. He prayed הִקְרַח־נָא לִפְנֵי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה-חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי אֲבִרְהָם, "make it chance before me this day and do kindness with my master Abraham" (Gen. 24:12). Ribqah's magnificent response to his request included: אֶשָּׂאב עַד אִם-כָּלוּ לְשִׁתּוֹת, "I will draw until they conclude drinking," quenching their thirst (ibid. v. 19). When the servant's character test - essentially looking for kindness - was concluded, he asked, "whose daughter are you?" Immediately upon her answer - learning that she is from the right family - he gives her gifts. Each of these elements has a thematic or distinctive linguistic parallel in the corresponding Megillah scene.

When Ruth first went out to the fields to pick gleanings, וַיִּקַּר מִקְרָהּ, “it chanced for her to come upon the portion of the field that belonged to Boaz” (Ruth 2:3). Boaz asked his assistant, הַנָּצֵב עַל-הַקּוֹצְרִים, “who stood watchfully” over the harvesters, “to whom is this girl?” (ibid. v. 5). (In the following verse the foreman is again mentioned as הַנָּצֵב (עַל-הַקּוֹצְרִים).) Immediately upon being told of Ruth’s family connection, Boaz, having heard of her beneficence, begins extending her great kindness. He tells her that when she becomes thirsty she may go to the vessels וְשָׁתִית, מֵאֶשֶׁר יִשְׁאַבּוּן הַנְּעָרִים, “and drink from where the lads draw” (ibid. 2:9), introducing both a water-drawing site as well as a thirst-quenching gesture into the narrative.

Abraham’s servant gave thanks to Hashem: ... בָּרוּךְ ה’ “Blessed is Hashem... who has not forsaken His kindness and truth from my master” (Gen. v. 27). He states his appreciation that Hashem led him to his master’s brethren. Although his mission still required great effort to bring the indicated result to fruition, G-d had spoken and the servant realized it; he now focused his efforts on bringing about the marriage. Meanwhile, Ribqah goes home and reports to her family (לְבֵית אִמָּהּ) on what transpired (ibid. v. 28).

Ruth returns to her mother-in-law and relates the day’s events. Although there is a long way to go, Naomi immediately senses Divine Providence at work and the matrimonial and redemption potential for her daughter-in-law, which she must nurture with great skill to actualize. She expresses her thanksgiving to Hashem with the following words: ... בָּרוּךְ הוּא לֹה’ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֲסִדּוֹ. “Blessed be he to Hashem who has not forsaken His kindness” (Ruth 2:20). It is noteworthy that these Genesis and Ruth usages of the phrase אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֲסִדּוֹ are the only two attestations of this locution in Tanakh. Naomi proclaims that Hashem has led Ruth to a relative - קָרֹב לָנוּ הָאִישׁ מִגֵּאֲלֵנוּ הוּא - using words very similar to those of the servant, that Hashem has

led him to take the daughter of “אָחי אֲדֹנִי” (my master’s brother) for his son. In redemption contexts “redeemer” and “brother” are employed virtually synonymously (see Lev. 25).

Ruth added a detail: Boaz had also told her, “Stay close to my workers until all my harvest is finished” (Ruth 2:21, NJPS). She employed the phrase “עַד אִם־כָּלִי,” just as Ribqah did when telling the servant that she will draw water until the camels were through drinking. Again, these are the only two attestations of this locution in Tanakh.

Upon the servant being seated in his hosts’ home, he made a point of his desire to expedite his responsibility: “I will not eat until I speak my words” (Gen. 24:33). When Naomi senses that Boaz recognizes his responsibility, she comments that he will “not be silent” until he concludes the matter that very day (Ruth 3:18).

Finally, when Yishaq marries Ribqah, it states, וַיִּקַּח וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה אֶת־רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (Gen. 24:67). When Boaz and Ruth marry, it states, וַיִּקַּח בָּעַז אֶת־רוּת וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (Ruth 4:13). These are the only two attestations in Tanakh of this compound phrasal formula. The succeeding phrase in the Megillah, “וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים” is alliteratively linked to the immediately preceding phrase in that corresponding Genesis verse, “וַיִּבְרָא יְצַחַק הָאֱלֹהִים.”

With this full constellation of correlations the message is unmistakable. Ruth was a sincere convert to the nation of Israel; she sensed G-d’s call, following in the footsteps of Abraham (and Ribqah). As G-d intervened on behalf of Abraham to provide the proper wife for his son so did He on behalf of Naomi, to provide the proper husband for her daughter-in-law. Things come about in ways that to the casual observer might appear as happenstance but to the discerning eye are clearly Providential. Superlative virtues distinguished both Ribqah and Ruth. As Yishaq and Ribqah deserved each other so too did Ruth and Boaz, and a

notable future was in store for the latter couple as had materialized for the former one.

3. The Moabite Connection

The Torah legislation regarding Moabites is seemingly necessary to fully understand certain facets of the Megillah:

An Ammonite or Moabite may not enter the congregation of Hashem (קָהָל ה'); even unto the tenth generation they may not enter the congregation of Hashem, ever, because they did not come forward toward you with bread and water when you were on the journey coming out of Egypt and for hiring against you Balaam... to curse you (Deut. 23:4-5).

The Talmud limits the prohibition to males, one interpretation being that it is essentially the males' responsibility to come forth with bread and water to weary travelers and another being that the terms עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי imply males (BT *Yeb.* 76b-77a). Since the logic of making a distinction between males and females was not so apparent, this permissibility for females was variously contested and not fully accepted in all places at all times. The Talmud, in its *aggadic* fashion, asserts that at one point it was necessary to threaten force to have the distinction accepted (ibid.).

When discouraging her daughters-in-law from returning with her by referring to the difficulty of marriage in Israel, Naomi may have been alluding to the potential problem related to the concept ensconced in these verses. When Naomi and Ruth entered Bethlehem, the whole town buzzed with surprise over them, but, tellingly, and contrary to general practice when a needy and bereaved widow returns home, there is no indication of any significant befriending of them, undoubtedly because of the Moabite stigma.

Although Boaz was greatly impressed with Ruth and encouraged her to remain in his fields, provided for her protection from molestation and allowed her privileges not accorded the other poor, in certain ways he remained aloof. He did not inform her of his being a close relative of her late father-in-law. He did not relieve her of the necessity to stand all day in the sun gathering gleanings for her and her mother-in-law to survive. He made no effort to contact Naomi and took no initiative regarding redemption of the land. Despite his compassionate expressions these were disappointing omissions; based on the continuation of the story we may surely assume that they resulted from his fear of the Moabite connection.

It appears that Naomi's awareness of that fear explains why, at the end of the season, when she realized Ruth's contact with Boaz was about to conclude, she advised her to take matters into her own hands. She sensed that it was necessary to present Boaz with a powerful and clear-cut opportunity to face up to his responsibility and take the appropriate action, even if the only tactic available bordered on seduction. Her tactic recalls Tamar's strategy with Judah (Gen. 38). Oftentimes, even high-quality individuals are victims of fear and inertia and do not address matters of social justice that lie within their immediate sphere of human interaction until they are directly challenged, at which time they rise to the occasion.

When the relative closer than Boaz was informed that the condition of redeeming Elimelekh's property involved marrying Ruth to establish the deceased's name on his property, he backed off, fearful it will ultimately damage his estate. He was concerned that the law concerning a Moabite may one day be thought of as prohibiting marriage to Ruth. Boaz declared his willingness to redeem the land and marry Ruth. He called the elders and others to witness his intent and there was a large, public ceremony to confirm the transaction. The halakha was firmly established

that Ruth was permitted and everybody extended their blessings.

Boaz' name means "in whom is courage." He took the correct stand in accepting Ruth, although it may have been unpopular and although he knew that it would require ongoing steadfastness in the future.

4. Another Aspect of Meaning

Additionally, the Megillah is a tale of a family's resurrection after having almost reached the point of obliteration. During a famine a man with his wife and two sons left Bethlehem of Judah to live in Moab. The singular and anonymous **וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ**, with the general tone of the first verse, indicates that he left while others were not leaving Judah. We later discover that this man, Elimelekh, possessor of a distinguished name meaning "my G-d is king," had been a landowner from a prominent family. Moving to Moab, he abandoned his heritage and people. He soon dies. His wife Naomi, "pleasantness," is left with the sons, Mahlon and Khilyon, names meaning "sickness" and "destruction" respectively. Obviously these are symbolic names, for people do not so call their sons. Indeed, all the Megillah's names appear to be symbolic.

Both sons marry Moabite wives and after ten years they also pass away, childless, leaving forlorn widows. All that remained of the family were the bereaved mother beyond child-bearing years and her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Upon Naomi's urging, Orpah returns to her family, her name perhaps referring to the "back of the neck," derived from her action of turning away. The family that abandoned its spiritual legacy is now practically decimated, a significant statement about the negative consequences associated with leaving the land of Israel.

Nevertheless, the Megillah teaches, as long as there is life there is hope and redemption is possible. The restoration was brought about in a way impossible to have

imagined - through the superlative loyalty, kindness and sacrifice of the remaining Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth.

In the Talmud (BT *B.Batra* 14b) the view is expressed that Megillat Ruth was written by the prophet Shemuel, at the end of the era of the Judges (pre-1000 BCE), relatively close to the time of its setting. However, the literary evidence indicates that it was composed centuries later. It states, "Thus was the custom in former times in Israel... to validate a transaction, one man would take off his shoe and hand it to his fellow" (Ruth 4:7), implying a significantly later era, when the old custom not only fell into disuse but was widely unknown. Its opening verse, "And it was in the days when the Judges ruled" (ibid. 1:1), is more suitable for an author describing a time long past. While the Megillah's language is classic Biblical, some of its diction and word usage appears more consistent with the exilic period, such as the words "*te'agena*" (1:13), "*vayisbot*" (2:14), and others. Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon ר"ע was of the opinion that it was probably written about the time of the Babylonian exile of Judah in 586 BCE, part of the prophetic output of Jeremiah, when the national situation was bleak with the people deep in despair and in great need of encouragement to counteract their pessimism and prompt them to believe that there was hope for restoration.

The family's decline and resurrection may very well be an allegory referring to the nation of Israel going into exile, the enormous trials and tribulations befalling it there, and its subsequent national revival and restoration when the remnant, perhaps a tiny part of the remnant, chose to sincerely commit itself to the Covenant. Although the principles of repentance and return are detailed in the Torah, theoretical statements benefit from a story manifesting the principles at work. Indeed, when reading the last portion of the Deuteronomy execration section predicting the final chastisement in the land followed by exile with the problems continuing there (Deut. 28:59 ff.), one

cannot help but think of the two sons who died prematurely and childless, מַחֲלוּן וְכָלִיון (“Sickness” and “Destruction”). The relevant Deuteronomy text explicitly speaks of sicknesses with the words חָלִי and חָלָים (ibid. vv. 59, 61) followed shortly afterwards by וְכָלִיון עֲיָנִים (ibid. v. 65)!

Rabbi Sassoon understood the name Ruth as derived from the Aramaic word יְרוּתָא “inheritance,” corresponding to the Hebrew word יְרוּשָׁה, consistent with the rules of ש and ת transference between these languages. Thus, the heroine’s name appropriately strikes the theme of the message. It is noteworthy that on the Moabite stone (9th Century BCE), the word for יְרוּשָׁה appears written with a ת. (See *Natan Hokhmah Lishlomo*, Heb. pp. 101-2.)

5. Ruth and Tamar

As pointed out, Ruth’s sincerely motivated clandestine attempt at union with Boaz (Ruth 3:9) recalls Tamar’s sincere deception of her father-in-law Judah (Gen. 38), from which Peres, Boaz’ paternal ancestor, derived.

There is unmistakable structural and conceptual linkage between the Genesis narrative concerning Tamar and that of Ruth. At the head of the families are Judah and Elimelekh. Judah separates from his brothers and home locale, marries a Canaanite woman and has sons (three), two of whom die prematurely and childless. Elimelekh leaves his land with his two sons who marry Moabite women and who also die prematurely and childless. In both narratives, carrying on the name of the deceased - *yibum* or redemption - through the available widow becomes a central theme of the narrative as well as a primary goal of a female protagonist, but is postponed or avoided by the males. Judah wrongly fears possible death for his remaining son through contact with Tamar while Elimelekh’s relative fears marriage with Ruth, which may “destroy” his estate, probably because of the Moabite connection.

At a critical point, when it appears that *yibum* or redemption will be put off indefinitely, the women act boldly. Tamar is told that Judah will be going to shear his sheep, a traditionally joyous time for sheep owners, while Ruth is told that Boaz - Elimelekh's relative who replaces him in the schematic plan - having concluded the harvest, will be winnowing his crop, also a joyous occasion, comparable to the sheep-shearing. At a time when Tamar knew Judah was vulnerable (he had been consoled upon the death of his wife), Tamar removes her widow's clothing, dresses appropriately and stations herself for her task of seducing Judah in a location where he cannot help but notice her. Ruth bathes, anoints herself, dresses appropriately and uncovers Boaz' sleeping blanket and slips under it at his feet. Tamar used deceit while Ruth employed stealth.

Judah yields to the temptation and Shelah, who was the more appropriate *yabam*, is pre-empted. The progeny that derives from that liaison includes Boaz. Boaz, on the other hand, exercises self-restraint - "she lay at his feet until morning" (Ruth 3:14) - explaining to Ruth that there is one relative closer with whom the primary rights and responsibilities reside. (Rabbi Sassoon thought this should be viewed as representative of Boaz correcting Judah's impetuosity.) When the first-in-line refuses to exercise his right Boaz marries Ruth. The blessing of the people and the elders includes, "And may thy house be like the house of Peres whom Tamar bore unto Judah" (ibid. 4:12). From that relationship derives King David (ibid v. 17).

6. General Remarks

As a Moabite, Ruth derived from Lot's liaison with his elder daughter (Gen. 19:37). Thus, King David, derived from Boaz and Ruth, had these formative "illicit" relationships on both paternal and maternal pedigree lines. The wife of David's son Solomon, the mother of Rehab'am, through

whom the royal line was carried forward, was Na'ama Ha'Ammonit (1 Kings 14:21), a descendant of Lot's liaison with his younger daughter (Gen. 19:38).

That the royal line of Israel derives from such relationships teaches that a background of lowly birth does not relegate an individual to an ignoble life. Divine Providence comes down on the side of purity of heart when joined with ongoing compassionate, altruistic and innocent intentions, as opposed to favoring the strict letter of the law.

In an interesting comment on the long reign of King David, in contrast to the much shorter one of King Saul, Talmudic Sages state: "We do not appoint a *parnas* over the public unless a קופה של שרצים (a basket of rodents, signifying questionable background) is hanging from behind him, so that if he becomes haughty and arrogant, we can say to him 'look at your background'" (BT *Yoma* 22b).

The Yalkut Shimoni (Ruth 608) points out that every verse in Ruth begins with a "vav" except for eight. Rabbi Hiyya expounds: this hints at Ruth's deep attachment to the Covenant. Whether this statement was intended as *peshat* or not, the digit eight (as well as its decimal multiples) does signify the Covenant (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*¹). It surely is noteworthy that the Megillah proper (excluding the five-verse epilogue which is a genealogical addenda) is composed of exactly 80 verses.

Regarding the custom to read Ruth on Shabu'ot (cited in *Masekhet Sofrim* 14:16), the following may be said: Since on that day we celebrate the nation's entering into the Covenant, it is appropriate to read the inspiring story of an extraordinary individual who recognized the great value of sacrificing to be part of Israel and its heritage. It is also

¹ Referenced studies of Rabbi Shamah may be found online at www.judaic.org.

heartening to read of the magnificent reward G-d bestowed upon her. In addition, on this auspicious occasion it is proper to remind ourselves that the heritage of Israel is open to all sincere individuals who genuinely accept the responsibilities of the Torah, regardless of national or genealogical background, and that based on their personal merit they may rise to attain the foremost eminence within the nation.

Megillat Ruth

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

As is well known the Jewish custom is to read Megillat Ruth on Shabuot. Yet there are diverse opinions about how and when to read it. Masekhet Soferim¹ records the practice of reading Megillat Ruth with a blessing “*al miqra megilla*” (“on the reading of the scroll”) on Shabuot.

Ruth is read on the end of the first day of “gathering” (*mosa’e yom tob rishon shel `asseret*) until half the book and it is completed at the end of the second day. And there are those who say that all (the megillah readings) are begun on the night after Shabbat before the holiday and thus the people have practiced.... (4:18)

This source records two customs regarding the reading. Interestingly, the popular custom as recorded above is not practiced anywhere today. Currently, there are four customs concerning the reading of Megillat Ruth on Shabuot. The Sephardic custom is not to read the megillah during prayer services at all. Rather, the Megillah is read as part of the “*tiqqun lel Shabuot*” (the portion learned on Shabuot night). It is also read during the holiday; half of the scroll is read on the first afternoon of the holiday and half on the second afternoon (similar to the first custom that Masekhet Soferim recorded.)

The Galician Hassidic groups read the megillah before the second day’s Torah reading (in the diaspora). They read

¹ Masekhet Soferim, in its present form, dates to the middle of the eighth century, though it is based on much older traditions. It contains rules for production of Torah scrolls and regulations of public Torah reading. It can be found in the common edition of the Babylonian Talmud (along with other “minor tractates”) after Masekhet “Horayot.”

from a humash and not from a scroll and they read individually (“beyahid”). The custom of the Mitnagdim is to have the cantor read publicly from either a scroll, if one is available, or from a humash—without a prior blessing. Some groups in Israel who follow the rulings of R. Eliyahu of Vilna, read Megillat Ruth from a scroll with a blessing (Zevin, *Hamoadim behalacha*, pp. 327-328).

Yalqut Shimoni (Yalqut Shimoni Ruth, 596) explained the association of Megillat Ruth with the festival of Shabuot (called “the period of the giving of the Torah” by the sages).

What is the association of “Ruth” with “‘Asseret” (“Gathering Festival”), that it is read during “‘Asseret” at the time of the giving of the Torah? To teach that Torah is only given through affliction and poverty. As it is written: “Your tribe dwells there; O God, in Your goodness You provide for the needy.” (Psalms 68:11)

Other explanations of the association between Ruth and Shabuot include the fact that the main events of Ruth occur during the grain harvest, which is also the season of Shabuot, or that Ruth’s decision to become part of Naomi’s people and to accept her God, is similar to the “conversion” that the Israelites underwent when they became God’s people (Hamanhig, Abudraham). B.S. Jacobsen extended the latter idea, suggesting that since Israel alone received the Torah, there was a need to show that the Torah beckons the righteous of all nations by describing Ruth’s sincere conversion (Netiv Binah vol. 4 p. 148). Other reasons include Boaz’s adherence to the laws of leaving behind grain for the needy, described after the offering to be given on Shabuot in Leviticus 23 (Levush 494); another association is that King David was born on Shabuot and this scroll describes King David’s ancestors (Bekhor Shor, Baba Batra 13b).

The Story and Storytelling

The story is simple. An impoverished Israelite widow, Naomi, and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, return to Bethlehem after both their husbands died in Moab. Boaz, a wealthy relative of the former father-in-law marries the daughter-in-law and inherits the rights of the deceased. They have a son, Obed, who ends up being David's grandfather. Though simple, the story is a fine example of the art of biblical narrative. Sparse detail, importance of dialogue, "type-scenes," allusion, word-play, poetic-prose, varying perspectives etc. are all used to create a story that is as meaningful as it is interesting to read. Let us examine some of these literary elements.

Literary Foils

The book develops three main characters: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. It is the interplay between these three that determines the main action of the book. Megillat Ruth highlighted two of these characters, Ruth and Boaz, by using literary "foils." Ruth's character, for example, is displayed by using her sister-in-law Orpah as a foil in a scene leaving Moab with her mother-in-law, Naomi. In this case the foil, Orpah, is very devoted to her mother-in-law, Naomi. She is equal to Ruth in devotion after Naomi's first plea to leave.

And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping and said to her, "no, we will return with you to your people."

There is no differentiation between the daughters-in-law...yet. After Naomi's second impassioned plea for them to leave,² there is a contrast between the daughters-in-law.

² Naomi's selfless character is palpably depicted in her arguments to her two daughters-in-law:

They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and Ruth clung to her. (1:14)

These both seem to be positive reactions of remaining with Naomi. The attachment between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law is great—"kissing" and "clinging" both describe close attachment. We do not know what the result of Naomi's speech was--until Naomi informs us in her next plea to Ruth that Orpah's kiss was a farewell kiss.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law."

We are not even sure to whom Naomi is talking until the next verse has Ruth replying. The character "Orpah" highlights Ruth's loyalty by displaying great loyalty, but not as much as Ruth. The conclusion one reaches is that though Orpah is good, Ruth is better.

Boaz is also set off by an anonymous minor character (*peloni almoni*- "so and so") who almost redeems Elimelekh's lands and marries Ruth. Boaz presents the

Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of the Lord has struck out against me.

Naomi has only her daughters-in-law's best interest in mind and is giving them the best advice she can. Her situation would be better off with her daughters-in-law, yet she does not consider that at all when giving them advice. She does not just make a show of insisting they return to a better situation, she makes reasoned arguments to convince them. Naomi's arguments center around one issue only, the likelihood of there being another chance to continue the name of their deceased husbands.

issue to the redeemer as a matter of property rights. The redeemer initially agrees to redeem the property. He demurs when Boaz reveals that he would also have to redeem the wife of the deceased, Ruth.

The redeemer replied, "Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate." (4:6)

The danger associated with marrying Ruth and how precisely that would "impair his estate" (4:6) is open to various explanations³,*** yet what is clear is that Boaz did not consider these factors when deciding to marry Ruth. Boaz, when first becoming aware of the situation, says:

Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich. And now, daughter, have no fear. I will do in your behalf whatever you ask, for all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are. But while it is true I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another redeemer closer than I. Stay for the night. Then in the morning, if he will act as a redeemer, good! Let him redeem. But if he does not want to act as redeemer for you, I will do so myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning. (3:10-13)

Boaz realizes Ruth's loyalty and other qualities. These qualities are the only thing that is driving him to act on her

³ Rashi, following a rabbinic opinion, explained that the other redeemer did not properly understand the Torah's prohibition of marrying a Moabite (the rabbinic understanding of Deuteronomy 23:4). He understood the prohibition to apply to men and woman, whereas it only applied to the men. Alternatively, he might be referring to financial ruin with the need to support two more women. Or perhaps the reference is to bringing a source of contention into his family by having a child from a "forced" marriage who might quarrel with his other children. Assuming he was married, then he might be unwilling to marry a second wife with all its associated problems.

behalf. Boaz's concern is for people, and not for self-gain. Boaz is clearly set apart from this non-redeeming redeemer (Incidentally, note the repetition of the verb g.a.l. in these two sections; even the word "egleh" in verse 4:4 is playing with the same string of letters).

The way this anonymous character is introduced into the story creates dramatic suspense. We, the readers, expect and even want the very good man, Boaz, to marry Ruth. We are already aware of his fine character and his concern for Ruth. He is much better than a "so and so," though the other person has the stronger claim. The other redeemer's initial affirmative response to Boaz's informing him of his opportunity to redeem his kinsman's land disappoints us to some extent—until he finally refuses to redeem—because of Ruth, the very reason Boaz sought to redeem.

Symbolism

Another literary technique is the symbolic use of names. Naomi herself makes us aware of the importance of the names by making a play on her name upon returning to Bethlehem. Naomi's name comes from the word N.'M. which means pleasant. When she returned widowed and destitute from Moab the people of Beth Lehem exclaimed in their astonishment, "Can this be Naomi?" Naomi replied:

So not call me Naomi...Call me Mara (bitterness) for Shaddai has made my lot bitter. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me. (1:20-21)

The names of the minor characters are not important enough to record (*"pelsoni almoni"*="so and so", although this might be a way of not mentioning a character whose behavior is less than admirable) and are even symbolic (it is hard to imagine people naming their children "Mahlon" and

“Khilyon”=“sickness” and “destruction,” although symbolic names were sometimes given by prophets and others). Orpah’s name probably derives from the word “oref” which means the “back of the neck,” the part of the body shown when you turn away from someone, as she ultimately did. The name of the heroine of the story, Ruth, is less clear. One interesting possibility is reflected in the Peshitta (the Syriac translation of the Bible). There her name is “Re’uth” which derives from the word “re’a” which means “friend.” This might reflect her loyalty to her mother-in-law. Rabbi S.D. Sassoon explained “Ruth” in another way. “Ruth” would be similar to the Aramaic translation of the word “to inherit” (Hebrew “yarash”= Aramaic “yarat,” see the targum to Numbers 24:18; apparently Moabite was similar to aramaic in this respect as the Moabite stone also has the word “yeruta”). Ruth carried with her the inheritance of Elimelekh.

Literary Allusion

In the evening meeting between Ruth and Boaz (chapter 3), the story also alludes to two similar situations— Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19:31ff), and Tamar, Yehuda’s daughter-in-law (Genesis 38). The three situations have common features, most notably, that there are women who have little prospect of having further children and who take actions to insure their own offspring. Additionally, each of the cases has the death of two husbands. The differences in the Ruth story emphasize Ruth’s modesty and Boaz’s self-control. Ruth, unlike Lot’s daughters, makes only a symbolic advance to Boaz, who had been drinking of his own accord. Lot’s daughters get their father drunk and have relations with him. Boaz’s self-control, in contrast to Yehuda’s impulsive behavior, allows him to follow the proper procedure regarding the more rightful redeemer. Rabbi Sassoon explained that the meeting between Ruth and Boaz is a “tiqqun” (rectification) of the previous two

encounters. Ruth is the descendant of the product of the first encounter, Moab, and Boaz is a descendant of a product of the second encounter, Peress. It is the correction of these earlier encounters that eventually leads to the birth of the ruling dynasty in Israel.

Purpose

Although various interesting suggestions have been proposed⁴, the question of the book's purpose was already raised by the midrash:

R. Ze'ira said: This scroll does not have in it impurity or purity, prohibited or permitted, why was it written? To teach the great reward for those who give graciously (*gomleh hasadim*). (Ruth Rabbah 2:14)

According to R. Zeira the book is about hesed. Ruth, the Moabite, is the character most roundly praised for her "hesed." Yet, it is the Moabite lack of kindness which leads to them being excluded from the "congregation of God" (understood to mean prohibition of marriage).

⁴ Amongst the various purposes attributed to the book are:

1) a description of David's ancestry. The book ends with David's genealogy, which is uncharacteristically absent from the book of Samuel.

2) "Presentation of the disagreeable fact of David having a Moabite ancestor in the best possible light" (Licht, Storytelling in the Bible, p. 125). David's Moab kinship could be inferred from the fact that he sends his family to Moab for refuge when he fled from Shaul (see 1 Samuel 22:3-4). The book of Ruth emphasizes that from David's father's side he is from the tribe of Yehuda. His Moabite relative is only his very worthy great-grandmother.

3) Countering the early second-temple opposition to marrying foreign women, including specifically Ammonites and Moabites. (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 10:29-31; 13:24-27)

4) To show how David's birth was the hand of God acting against significant odds. (Klein, Olam Hatanakh p. 74)

An Ammonite or a Moabite is not to enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation no one from them is to enter the assembly of the Lord, for the ages, on account that they did not greet you with food and with water on the way at your going out from Egypt.... (Deuteronomy 23 4-5; SB)

Ruth is the one who rises above her “breeding” and displays hesed and loyalty. She is obviously worthy of becoming part of God’s assembly.

We can now return to the issue raised at the beginning of this essay, namely, the Megillah’s association with Shabuot— answering in a homiletic vein. The display of hesed that is the mainstay of this short book is living Torah. Loyalty, commitment, righteous behavior, sexual propriety, respecting the rights of others, concern for the disadvantaged—all elements essential to the Torah—are illustrated in this book. The Torah, whose beginning and end is hesed (Sotah 14a), which was given in this season, is exemplified by the behavior of Ruth and Boaz, the main characters of Megillat Ruth.

A Woman of Valor Has Been Found: Ruth Amidst a Sea of Ambiguity¹

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Introduction

Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced (Feivel Meltzer).²

We may use this analogy as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat Ruth. At first blush, this idyllic tale brings joy to the biblical reader. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by *hesed* (loyalty, loving-kindness) superheroes, and with no villains. At worst, there are average characters (such as Orpah, Boaz' foreman, and So-and-so) who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth.³ R. Ze'ira's classic statement captures the essence of the Megillah:

R. Ze'ira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (*Ruth Rabbah* 2:14).⁴

Although it appears unambiguous that *hesed* is the predominant theme of our Megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that *hesed*, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize R. Ze'ira's statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human *hesed*? Additionally, what is the connection between Megillat Ruth and the period of the Judges?

¹ For this note and all subsequent notes, see pp. 115-117.

In an article on the syntactic ambiguity of Ruth 2:20, Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.⁵ Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth can fit these criteria.

Many elements that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints can coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages. In this essay, we will consider some of the major issues of the Megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

The First Five Verses: Punishment for Sins?

Some Midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. Elimelech left the Land of Israel⁶ and a starving community behind,⁷ while his sons remained in Moab and intermarried.⁸

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech's leaving and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons' intermarriages and their deaths do suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their deaths. By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the Megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.⁹ We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. Additionally, Abraham also left during a famine in Canaan (Gen. 12), and most commentators there justify his behavior.¹⁰ Should Elimelech and his family be held to a

higher standard of faith than the *avi ha-ma'minim* (father of true believers)?¹¹

These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. *Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion simply died*: They legitimately left during a famine. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech's sons. From this vantage point, nothing sinful occurred—these verses are primarily background setting the stage for the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be scrutinized for any theological significance of punishment for sins.

2. *This story is parallel to Job*: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20-21), but was restored to happiness by the end of the narrative. From this point of view, the deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the human characters in Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel Job, or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Ruth's characters held more responsible for their original suffering, and given more credit for their eventual happiness.¹²

3. *This is a story of sin/punishment and then hesed/reward*: Unlike the Patriarchs, Elimelech and his family left a starving community behind. The unwarranted lingering of Mahlon and Chilion in Moab led them to intermarry. Likewise, the happy ending of Megillat Ruth may be viewed as God's reward for everyone's *hesed* over the course of the story.

Does the text yield a sin/punishment conclusion? This reading is possible, but no more compelling than a non-

sin/punishment reading. This uncertainty encapsulates our difficulty in pinpointing any one specific interpretation of the ephemeral characters in the opening verses of Megillat Ruth.

Naomi

Was Naomi a passive follower of her husband, or an active participant in the abandonment of the community (assuming that there *was* anything negative about their leaving!)? Midrashim address both sides of the question:

He was the prime mover and his wife secondary to him, and his two sons secondary to both of them (*Ruth Rabbah* 1:5).¹³

Why did the text mention him, his wife, and his children? To teach that all of them were stingy (*Ruth Zuta* 1:2).

From the text, it is difficult to determine whether Naomi did anything wrong, if she was an innocent victim of her family members' sins, or if she was a victim of the unexplained deaths of her family members.¹⁴

The full range of motives behind Naomi's efforts to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab also remains elusive. Although Naomi emphasized the marital prospects of Ruth and Orpah (in 1:8-15), it is possible that she was driven by other considerations as well:

R. Shemuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Yehudah b. Hanina: Three times is it written here 'turn back', corresponding to the three times that a would-be proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted (*Ruth Rabbah* 2:16).

Why did Naomi want to return them? So that she would not be embarrassed by them. We find that there

were ten markets in Jerusalem, and they [i.e., the classes of people who shopped at each] never intermingled...The people were recognized by their clothing—what one class wore, another would not...(Ruth Zuta 1:8).

These Midrashim offer substantially different insights into Naomi's efforts. *Ruth Rabbah* 2:16 views Naomi as being unwilling to compromise Jewish religious standards. This view might receive textual support from Naomi's observation that Orpah's return to Moab came with religious consequences as well: "So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people *and her gods*. Go follow your sister-in-law'" (1:15; cf. Ibn Ezra, Malbim).

Ruth Zuta 1:8, in contrast, depicts a less flattering aspect of Naomi: her professed concern for the welfare of her Moabite daughters-in-law cloaked a desire to protect her own noble self-image in Judean society. The inordinate emphasis on Ruth as a "Moabite" (seven times in this tiny Megillah!) could support this reading as well.

Despite the potentially complex nature of her generosity, Naomi certainly emerged a winner by the end of the narrative. She had her estate redeemed by her wealthy relative Boaz; she was the toast of the town; and Ruth's son was born into the family. How might one view this happy ending?

It appears that there are several textually valid readings of Naomi's character:

1. *Hesed*: Who could ask for a better mother-in-law than Naomi? Bereft of her husband and sons, with only Ruth and Orpah to comfort her, Naomi was more concerned with their welfare than in tending to her own loneliness. Moreover, Naomi never stopped caring for Ruth, helping her find security via matrimony. We may add the potential idealism in Naomi's concern with the religious conversion issues related to taking them back with her to Israel. As a

consequence of her *hesed*, God rewarded Naomi at the end of the Megillah with family, friends, and land (4:14-17).

2. *More self-centered*: Although Naomi always verbally expressed interest in her daughters-in-law, she really was more concerned for herself. She joined her family in being stingy, abandoning her community. She wanted to drive her Moabite daughters-in-law away because they would harm her social status upon return. Naomi knew she could benefit from Boaz' intervention; therefore, she orchestrated the encounter between Boaz and Ruth to help herself. Fittingly, the narrative concludes with Naomi's happiness—she took the child, and had the blessings of her friends and her land. Ruth is only a tangential figure in the Megillah's climactic frame.¹⁵

3. *Naomi is similar to Job*: she suffered without any explanation, complained against God, and then was restored in the end:

She said to them, Call me not Naomi; call me Mara; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me (*ki hemar Shad-dai li me'od*) (Ruth 1:20).¹⁶

As God lives, who has taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who has tormented my soul (*ve-Shad-dai hemar nafshi*) (Job 27:2).

Although Naomi used similar language as Job (possibly indicating that she viewed herself as suffering unjustly), the narrator remains conspicuously non-committal as to whether Naomi's story indeed parallels that of Job or not.

4. *Complexity*: Naomi was concerned with herself, and also for Ruth. One might view the happy ending either as a consequence of Naomi's (and the other characters') actions, or as a providential reward for her goodness (see further discussion below). This view combines the above explanations, and each layer of motivation appears to be simultaneously sustained by the text.

Boaz

Boaz was a hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9, 15) and helped her in other ways unbeknownst to Ruth (2:15-17). He provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15), completed the redemption of Naomi's field, and married Ruth (3:18-4:10). Boaz deserves praise for overcoming the anti-Moabite biases of Judean society.

However, Boaz allowed Ruth to glean for approximately three months (cf. *Ruth Rabbah* 5:11), and he needed prodding from Naomi and Ruth before he took more substantial action. Why didn't he help earlier, especially given his awareness of Ruth's character and outstanding accomplishments (2:11-12)?

Perhaps the Moabite issue figures decisively in answering that question. But was Ruth's background a legitimate cause for delay, or an excuse for inaction? Once confronted with Ruth at the threshing floor, Boaz acknowledged that everyone knew Ruth to be an *eshet hayil* (woman of valor), and that she *did* have other marital options within that society (3:10-11). More significantly, the Moabite excuse could explain Boaz' possible reluctance to marry Ruth; but how do we justify his allowing her to beg in his field for so long? As Feivel Meltzer observes (on 2:8, n. 20), "it is impossible to understand adequately why Boaz did not see it fit to visit the widows and attend their needs."

Sensitive to these cues, some Midrashim cast Boaz as one who acted kindly only when he knew he would receive something in return:

R. Yitzhak commented: The Torah teaches you that when a person performs a good deed he should do so with a cheerful heart...If Boaz had known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would have it written of him that he 'Gave her parched corn' (2:14), he would have given her fatted calves! (*Lev. Rabbah* 34:8).

Rabbah, son of R. Huna, said in the name of Rav: Ibzan is Boaz. What does he come to teach us [by this statement]?...Boaz made for his sons a hundred and twenty wedding feasts, for it is said, And he [Ibzan] had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent abroad, and thirty daughters he brought in from abroad for his sons; and he judged Israel seven years (Jud. 12:9); and in the case of everyone [of these] he made two wedding feasts, one in the house of the father and one in the house of the father-in-law. To none of them did he invite Manoah, [for] he said, ‘Whereby will the barren mule repay me?’ All these died in his lifetime (*Bava Batra* 91a).

It appears that these Midrashim perceived that Boaz spoke generously to Ruth, but still required prodding to go beyond allowing Ruth to beg under better than average conditions. Boaz spoke more than any other figure in the Megillah (21 verses for him, 17 for Naomi, 11 for Ruth), but his flowery talking did not fully match his actions.

To summarize: Boaz certainly is a paragon of *hesed*. At the same time, however, some Midrashim view Boaz’ *hesed* as insufficient and motivated at least partially by his own interests. Both lines of interpretation are simultaneously supported by the text.

Divine-Human Continuum in Ruth

There is an apparent ambiguity in 2:20:

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed is he to the Lord, who has not abandoned His kindness with the living and with the dead.”

or

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed to the Lord is he who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead.”¹⁷

It is unclear if Naomi acknowledged God for orchestrating the upward turn of events, or whether Naomi blessed Boaz for his efforts in treating Ruth well and for his potential as a redeemer. Mordechai Cohen views this verse as deliberately ambiguous, intended to highlight the complex relationship between human and divine action in the book of Ruth. This ambiguity runs through all of the Megillah, as it often is unclear where human initiative stops and God's intervention begins.

While Boaz blessed Ruth by saying that God should reward her for coming under His wings (*tahat kenafav*, 2:12), Ruth eventually realized that nothing would get done unless Boaz would actively spread his "wings" over Ruth (*u-parastah kenafekha al amatekha*, 3:9). Earlier, Naomi had prayed that God grant marital security (*menuhah*) to her daughters-in-law (1:9); but she ultimately had to orchestrate the threshing floor scene to provide that security (*mano'ah*) for Ruth (3:1). One might view the happy ending as a consequence of the concerted actions of the characters. It is equally possible to view the human actions as mirroring God's plan—the divine blessings people had wished on one another had been fulfilled.

It is noteworthy that the only two times the narrator explicitly mentions God's involvement are with the end of the famine (1:6), and Ruth's getting pregnant (4:13). This leaves the extent of God's involvement subject to speculation. Does the Megillah teach that God "withdrew" Himself to allow greater human action, or does it reveal God's providential hand constantly assisting these paragons of *hesed*?

The Relationship Between Ruth and Judges

The opening verse of Megillat Ruth connects the narrative to the period of the judges. How is the reader to understand the connection between the Dark Age of Judges, and the display of *hesed* in Megillat Ruth, where

the Judeans were religiously faithful and kind to one another?

R. Yisrael Rozen suggests that the root cause of the failure during the period of Judges was that people were too self-centered. Shiloh—the home of the Tabernacle at that time—is insignificant in Judges (mentioned only twice in passing, in Jud. 18:31; 21:19), symptomatic of the lack of unity during that period.

R. Rozen observes that in Judges, the word *hesed* appears only twice, and both in negative contexts: In Judges 1:24, the tribe of Joseph asks a Canaanite to do them *hesed* by betraying his countrymen and revealing the entrance to Bethel. In Judges 8:35, the Israelites are said *not* to have done *hesed* to Gideon's family after his death. In the tiny book of Ruth, in contrast, the word *hesed* appears three times and plays a central role (1:8; 2:20; 3:10).¹⁸

Is Megillat Ruth a contrast to the period of the judges, or an organic component of that period? The Megillah does not offer greater precision in dating the narrative than its occurrence in the period of the judges—a period spanning some 350 years. Some Midrashim link Ruth to the time of the earlier judges,¹⁹ while others identify Boaz with the later judge Ibzan (Jud. 12:8).²⁰ Malbim, followed by R. Rozen, however, suggests a literary interpretation: since the story of Ruth is not dated precisely, the story may be viewed as representative of the entire period.

How Megillat Ruth is representative of the period of the judges, however, remains problematic. Malbim asserts that Megillat Ruth parallels the negativity of Judges—the opening verses demonstrate that people were concerned primarily for themselves, and this selfishness was characteristic of the period. According to Malbim, then, Megillat Ruth's connection to the period of Judges is limited primarily to its opening verses. The remainder of Megillat Ruth, in contrast, is characterized by *hesed*.

Alternatively, one might argue that Megillat Ruth is characteristic of the period, but in a more complex manner. Most people were good, or at least average. However, the unwillingness of tribes and individuals to help one another, demonstrates a general lack of *hesed*. People helped others primarily when they could gain something themselves. The Gemara (*Bava Batra* 91a) cited earlier regarding Boaz—one of the greatest figures of that era—captures this theme. Boaz certainly demonstrated *hesed*; but the Gemara accuses even this hero of not inviting Manoah (Samson’s father) to his children’s wedding feasts since he would never get a reciprocal invitation. To remedy this societal problem, and to break out from the cycle of the period, they needed an outsider like Ruth to teach them what true *hesed* was. One Midrash captures this message:

God said: may Ruth, who is a convert, and who did not challenge her mother-in-law—come and rebuke Israel who has rebelled against Me (*Ruth Zuta* 1:7).

This Midrash is looking far beneath the surface reading of Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans are not depicted as “rebels.” Rather, the Midrash appears to forge an intimate connection between Megillat Ruth and Judges, and determines the root problem inherent in Israel’s society to be consistent with R. Rozen’s characterization of that period.

Conclusion

There is one character in this Megillah who is less ambiguous than the others: Ruth. Ruth reflects genuine *hesed*: she sacrificed heroically to accompany Naomi and to accept God. Ruth is compared to Abraham in leaving her family to serve God:

The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I

will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-2).

Boaz said in reply (to Ruth), “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before” (Ruth 2:11).

Through this comparison, one might argue that Ruth is portrayed even more favorably than Abraham. God had spoken directly to Abraham, and promised him reward. In contrast, Ruth came voluntarily, and hardly could have expected anything but a lifetime of begging and discrimination in return for her sacrifices. Ruth also avoided marriage opportunities with younger Judeans in order to marry Boaz to preserve Mahlon’s name.

Ruth lived in a world where ambiguity was pervasive. The extent of God’s intervention in her suffering and salvation is unclear, and so are the motivations of the members of the society on whom she depended. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Mahlon, and God. Although Midrashim link the ideal woman to other figures as well, Ruth has the distinction of being the *only* biblical woman explicitly called by the epithet *eshet hayil* (woman of valor, 3:11). While Ruth struggled mightily to preserve Mahlon’s name, she in fact has immortalized her own name, winning the hearts of readers generation after generation.

Megillat Ruth is characterized by deliberate ambiguity. Not only are multiple readings possible; these ambiguities are precisely the vehicles through which the short narrative captures so many subtleties in so short a space. These complexities guide readers to delve more deeply into the Megillah and recognize the religious implications for their own lives.

NOTES

¹ This essay was not previously published in its full form. An abridged version appeared in *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33:2 (2005), pp. 91-99, as “A Midrashic View of Ruth amidst a Sea of Ambiguity” (reprinted in my *Through an Opaque Lens* [New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006], pp. 296-306).

² *Da’at Mikra, Hamesh Megillot*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1973), introduction to *Ruth*, p. 3, n. 1.

³ See especially Meltzer, introduction to *Da’at Mikra: Ruth*, p. 8; Moshe Garsiel, “Literary Structure, Development of Plot, and the Goal of the Narrator in Megillat Ruth” (Hebrew), in *Hagot ba-Mikra*, vol. 3, ed. E. Menahem (Tel Aviv: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1979), pp. 66-83.

⁴ Translations of passages from the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah (occasionally with minor modifications) are taken from Soncino.

⁵ Mordechai Cohen, “*Hesed*: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), pp. 11-38, especially pp. 32-33.

⁶ See *Bava Batra* 91a; *Gen. Rabbah* 25:3; Rashi (on 1:2), Meltzer.

⁷ See *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4; *Tanhuma Behar* 3; *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 77b; Rashi (on 1:2).

⁸ See *Ruth Rabbah* 2:9; Rashi (on 1:12), Malbim (on 1:4), who maintain that Ruth and Orpah did not convert prior to their marriages to Mahlon and Kilyon. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) disagrees, as does *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 79a. Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:9) maintains that the family members were punished because they were communal leaders and therefore held to a higher standard of conduct. Malbim adopts a middle position: the initial departure of Elimelech and family was justified, since they went only as a temporary measure (*la-gur*); once they elected to stay permanently, however (*va-yeshevu sham*), they brought punishment upon themselves.

⁹ Sensitive to this difficulty, *Tanhuma Buber Behar* 8 states, “For those ten years, God was warning them. When He saw that they were not repenting, He began to strike their camels and cattle—yet they still did not repent. When He saw that they did not repent, immediately (!) ‘Mahlon and Chilion died also.’” See also *Ruth Zuta* 1:4, “This teaches that decrees are suspended for ten years.” Of course, without these

modifications, the text is far less clear in presenting their deaths as punishment.

¹⁰ According to the majority opinion, the Torah teaches that in the absence of explicit prophetic instructions, one may not depend on supernatural intervention in times of crisis. See, for example, *Pesahim* 8b; *Kiddushin* 39b; *Bava Kamma* 60b; *Hullin* 142a. For further sources, see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 1, s.v. “*en somekhin al ha-nes*,” pp. 679-681. For elaboration on Ramban’s dissenting position, see David Berger, “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides,” in *Rabbi Moshe Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., Center for Jewish Studies, 1983), pp. 107-128.

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that the rest of the Bethlehemites appear to have remained at home and survived the famine while Elimelech left with his family. In contrast, Abraham brought his whole family to Egypt, rather than leaving others behind.

¹² See further discussion in R. Amnon Bazak, “The World is Built on *Hesed*: Between Megillat Ruth and Job” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 18-19 (1993), pp. 169-175.

¹³ Cf. Rashi, Malbim.

¹⁴ One might detect further criticism of Naomi in Ruth’s opening verses: Mahlon and Chilion did not marry Moabites until after their father’s death. *Akedat Yitzhak* and Alsheikh maintain that Mahlon and Chilion waited until Elimelech died to intermarry, since he would have stopped them. Moreover, Naomi chose to remain in Moab long beyond Elimelech’s death—even had she tagged along initially, she did not steer the family back home following the death of her husband.

¹⁵ The dialogue in chapter 4 intimates that Boaz considered Naomi’s field to be the primary element in the redemption altogether; Ruth is mentioned only in passing (4:3, 9-10). E.Z. Melammed (“Megillat Ruth in Light of the Halakhah” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 24 [1961], p. 156), however, maintains that Ruth was the more important aspect of the deal, but Boaz emphasized the field out of respect for Ruth.

¹⁶ Translations of biblical passages (occasionally with minor modifications) are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

¹⁷ See the survey of opinions on this verse in Mordechai Cohen, “*Hesed*: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” pp. 11-38. The above translations are from his article, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ R. Yisrael Rozen, “The Days When the Judges Judged: Generations of Vanity” (Hebrew), in *El Asher Telekhi: Studies in Megillat Ruth*,

Memorial Volume for the Fallen Soldier, Ariel Reviv, of Blessed Memory, ed. Elisha Buchreis (Jerusalem: Ketav va-Sefer publishing, 2002), pp. 159-177.

¹⁹ *Ruth Rabbah* 1:1; *Seder Olam Rabbah* 12; cf. *Makkot* 23a.

²⁰ *Bava Batra* 91a.