

ENACTING WHAT WE PRAY FOR: Theology and Ethics of our Time?

[Rabbi Shai Held](#) | September 11, 2020

I. “Luck” or Providence?

Ruth 2:3

³And off she went. She came and gleaned in a field, behind the reapers; and, as luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz, who was of Elimelekh’s family.

רות ב:ג

³וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתְּבוֹא וַתִּלְקֹט בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֲרֵי הַקְצֹרִים וַיִּקֶר
מִקִּלְהָ חִלְקֵת הַשָּׂדֶה לְבִעַז אֲשֶׁר מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת
אֱלִימֶלֶךְ:

Genesis 24:12

¹²And he said, “O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham:

בראשית כד:יב

¹²וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם הַקְרָה־נָא לִפְנֵי
הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה־חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם:

Genesis 27:20

²⁰Isaac said to his son, “How did you succeed so quickly, my son?” And he said, “Because the LORD your God granted me good fortune.”

בראשית כז:כ

²⁰וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־בְּנוֹ מֵהֲזֶה מַה־רַב לְמַצָּא בְנֵי
וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי הַקְרָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לִפְנֵי:

I Samuel 6:9

⁹Then watch: If it goes up the road to Bethshemesh, to His own territory, it was He who has inflicted this great harm on us. But if not, we shall know that it was not His hand that struck us; it just happened to us by chance.”

שמואל א ו:ט

⁹וַיִּרְאִיתֶם אִם־דָּרָךְ גְּבוּלוֹ יַעֲלֶה בְּיַד שְׁמֶשׁ הוּא
עָשָׂה לָנוּ אֶת־הַרְעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְאִם־לֹא וַיִּדְעוּנוּ
כִּי לֹא יָדוּ נִגְעָה בָּנוּ מִקְרָה הוּא הִיא לָנוּ:

II. A House for Ruth

Ruth 1:9

9May the LORD grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!" And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping.

Ruth 3:1

1Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, "Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy."

III. Under Whose Wing?

Ruth 2:10-14

10She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?" 11Boaz said in reply, "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.

12May the LORD reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!" 13She answered, "You are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant—though I am not so much as one of your maidservants." 14At mealtime, Boaz said to her, "Come over here and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar." So she sat down beside the reapers. He handed her roasted grain, and she ate her

רות א:ט

9!תן ה' לְכֹם וּמִצָּאן מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בְּיַת אִישׁוֹ וַתִּשָּׁק לָהֶן וַתִּשָּׂאנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה:

רות ג:א

1וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נַעֲמִי חֲמוּתָהּ בְּתִי הֲלֹא אֲבִיקָשׁ לָךְ מְנוּחַם אִשָּׁר יֵיטִב לָךְ:

רות ב:י-יד

10וַתִּפְּלַעַל עַל-פְּנֵיהָ וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אַרְצָה וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִדַּוְעָה מִצָּאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְהַכִּירַנִי וְאַנְכִי נִכְרִיָּה: 11וַיַּעַן בְּעַז וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הֲגֵד הֲגֵד לִי כָל אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתְ אֶת-חֲמוּתְךָ אַחֲרַי מוֹת אִישׁוֹ וַתַּעֲזֹבִי אָבִיךָ וְאִמְךָ וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתְּךָ וַתֵּלְכִי אֶל-עַם אִשָּׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתְּ תְּמוּל שְׁלֹשׁוֹם:

12יְשָׁלֵם ה' פְּעֻלָּךְ וַתְּהִי מִשְׁכַּרְתְּךָ שְׁלֵמָה מֵעַם ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-בָּאת לְחַסּוֹת תַּחַת-כְּנָפָיו: 13וַתֹּאמֶר אִמְצָא-חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲדֹנָי כִּי נִחַמְתָּנִי וְכִי דַבַּרְתָּ עַל-לֵב שְׁפֹחֲתְךָ וְאַנְכִי לֹא אֶהְיֶה כְּאִחַת שְׁפֹחֲתֶיךָ: 14וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ בְּעַז לֶעֶת הָאֲכֹל גְּשִׁי הַלֶּם וְאֲכַלְתְּ מִן-הַלֶּחֶם וְטַבַּלְתְּ פִּתְךָ בַחֲמִץ וַתִּשָּׁב מִצָּד הַקּוֹצְרִים וַיִּצְבֹּט-לָהּ קִלְי וַתֹּאכַל וַתִּשְׂבַּע וַתִּתֵּר:

fill and had some left over.

Ruth 3:9

9“Who are you?” he asked. And she replied, “I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman.”

רות ג:ט

9וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אַתְּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֲנִי רוּת אֲמֹתְךָ וּפְרִשְׁתָּ כְּנֹפֶךָ עַל־אַמְתְּךָ כִּי גֹאֵל אֶתְּהָ:

IV. Who Is It Who Remembers His Kindness?

Ruth 2:20

20Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead! For,” Naomi explained to her daughter-in-law, “the man is related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsmen.”

רות ב:כ

20וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי לְכַלְתָּהּ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לֵה 'אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֶסֶדְוֹ אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַמֵּתִים וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נַעֲמִי קְרוֹב לָנוּ הָאִישׁ מִגְּאֻלָּנוּ הוּא:

NRSV: Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.”

NIV: “The LORD bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.”

Genesis 24:27

27And said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the LORD, to the house of my master’s kinsmen.”

בראשית כד:כז

27וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֶסֶדְוֹ וְאִמְתּוֹ מִעַם אֲדֹנָי אֲנִי בְּדֶרֶךְ נְתַנִּי ה' בַּיִת אֲחֵי אֲדֹנָי:

C. John Collins, “Ambiguity and Theology in Ruth: Ruth 1:21 and 2:20,” in *Presbyterion* 19:2 (1993), pp. 97-102, at p. 100.

I am suggesting that the syntactic ambiguity is intentional. To be precise, I have no doubt that Naomi herself meant either the Lord or Boaz as the referent of *asher*, but in the haste of ordinary

conversation (as opposed to the careful language of literary craft), she framed the clause ambiguously. The narrator found this useful in conveying his message. We are to ask... "YHWH or Boaz?" But the right answer is "yes," since Boaz in the book of Ruth embodies aspects of the character of God, most importantly his *hesed*.

V. "Have No Fear"

Ruth 3:11

11And now, daughter, have no fear. I will do on your behalf whatever you ask, for all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are.

רות ג:יא

11 וְעַתָּה בְּתִי אֶל-תִּירְאִי כֹל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמְרִי אֶעֱשֶׂה-לָּךְ
כִּי יוֹדְעֵי כָל-שָׂעַר עִמִּי כִּי אֲשֶׁת חַיִּל אַתְּ:

Genesis 26:24

24That night the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham."

בראשית כו:כד

24 וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי
אַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ אֶל-תִּירָא כִּי-אַתָּה אֲנִי וַיְבָרְכֶנִי
וַהֲרַבִּיתִי אֶת-זַרְעֲךָ בְּעֵבוֹר אַבְרָהָם עַבְדִּי:

Deuteronomy 1:21

21See, the LORD your God has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed.

דברים א:כא

21 רְאֵה נָתַן ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ עֲלֶיהָ רָשׁ
כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְךָ אֶל-תִּירָא וְאַל-
תַּחַת:

VI. God Intervenes

Ruth 4:13

13So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her. The LORD let her conceive, and she bore a son.

רות ד:יג

13 וַיִּקַּח בְּעַז אֶת-רוּת וַתְּהִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ
וַיִּתֵּן ה' לָהּ הַרְיוֹן וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן:

Ruth 1:6

6She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the

רות א:ו

6 וַתֵּקַם הִיא וְכַלְתֶּיהָ וַתֵּשֶׁב מִשְׁדֵּי מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה
בְּשָׂדֵה מוֹאָב כִּי-פָקֵד יְהוָה אֶת-עַמּוֹ לְתַתּ לָהֶם
לֶחֶם:

LORD had taken note of His people and given them food.