

A Tale of Two Women

A study sheet exploring Jewish national identity and the biblical heroes Rut and Tamar

(This is based on a shiur given by Rabbi Sacks in 2016, available to view at www.RabbiSacks.org)

Similarities between Megillat Rut and Sefer Bereishit

SOURCE 1

Rashi on Bereishit 1:1

בראשית. אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל את התורה אלא מהחודש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו בה ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית? ... שאם יאמרו אמות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבועה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, בראונו נתנה להם, ובראונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:

“In the beginning.” — Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah which is the Law book of Israel should have commenced with the verse (Shemot 12:2) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months” which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation? ... For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan”, Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us” (Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 187).

SOURCE 2

Rut Rabbah 2:14

אמר רבי זעירא, מגלה זו אין בה לא טמאה, ולא טהרה, ולא אסור, ולא התר, ולמה נכתבה ללמדך כמה שכר טוב לגומלי חסדים.

Rabbi Zeira says: “This book [of Rut] does not have anything in it concerned with impurity or purity nor what is forbidden and what is permitted. So why is it written? To teach us the greatness of the reward for acts of lovingkindness.”

SOURCE 3

Rut 2:11

וינען בעז ויאמר לה הגד הגד לי כל אשר עשית את חמותך אחרי מות אישך ותעזבי אביך ואמך וארץ מולדתך ותלכי אל עם אשר לא ידעת תמול שלשום.

Boaz said, “I have heard of all you have done for your mother-in-law ever since your husband died, of how you left your father, your mother, the land of your birth, and came to a people you knew not the day before.

SOURCE 4

Bereishit 12:1

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך מחרצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך.

The Lord said to Avram, “Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house – to the land that I will show you.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. What similarities can you find between Sefer Bereishit and Megillat Rut?
2. Why do Rashi and the Midrash question the reason each of these books were written?
3. What connection is there between Avraham’s journey and Rut’s journey?

Now we can see what the two books have in common and what they are doing in the Tanach. Bereishit is **the prelude to the birth of the Jewish nation**, a book about a family. In the same way, the Book of Rut is the **prelude from a tribal society which is not unified to the birth of Israel as a kingdom and a united political body**.

Even though the rest of the Five Books of Moses is about the people of Israel as a nation – a political body, and the



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books of Samuel and Kings are about Israel as a kingdom – another kind of political body, they both have a prelude about **family**. This is to tell us of the primacy of the personal over the political. They teach that politics alone cannot sustain a society if that society’s foundations are not built upon acts of kindness, generosity, and moral strength the likes of which are best exemplified in stories about the human family. Ultimately, there cannot be a larger society if the individuals do not matter, or are ignored.

A Tale of Two Women

SOURCE 5

Rut 4:12

וַיְהִי בֵּיתָהּ כְּבֵית פֶּרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה תָמָר לַיהוּדָה מִן הַזֶּרַע אֲשֶׁר יָתַן ה' לָהּ מִן הַנְּעִרָה הַזֹּאת.

[The elders said to Boaz:] May your house be as the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda, growing from the seed that the Lord will give you from this young woman.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Who was Peretz and why is this an appropriate blessing to give Rut and Boaz?
2. How are Yehuda and Tamar connected to Megillat Rut?
3. What message is contained in this blessing?

SOURCE 6

Bereishit 38:1

וַיְהִי בְּעֵת הַהוּא וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אֶחָיו וַיֵּט עַד אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וַשְּׁמוֹ חִירָה.

Around that time, Yehuda left his brothers and camped near an Adulamite named Chira.

SOURCE 7

Rut 1:1-2

וַיְהִי יָמֵי שָׁפֹט הַפְּטִים וַיְהִי רָעָב אַרְצָה לְאִי מִיֵּת לְחֶם יְהוּדָה לְגֵר. וַיֵּשְׁבִי מֵאֲבָהּ אֶלְמָנָה וְשֵׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶלְמִלְכָּה וְשֵׁם אֶחָד מִבָּנֶיהָ מַחֲלֹן וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי כִילְיוֹן. וַיֵּשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב בְּיַד הַחֵמֶשׁ הַזֶּה.

Once, in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. One man set out from Beit Lechem of Yehuda and journeyed to live for a while in the land of Moav, and his wife and two sons came with him. This man's name was Elimelech, his wife's was Naomi, and his two sons' names were Machlon and Chilyon, all Efratites from Beit Lechem of Yehuda. They duly arrived in the fields of Moav, and there they stayed.

SOURCE 8

Bereishit 38:7-10

וַיְהִי עֵר בְּכוֹר יְהוּדָה רַע בְּעֵינֵי ה' וַיִּמָּתֶהוּ ה'. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְאוֹנָן בֶּאֱלָא אִשְׁתּוֹ אַחִידָה וַיִּבֶם אֶתְּהָ וְהָקָם זָרַע לְאַחִידָה. וַיָּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יִהְיֶה הַזֶּרַע וְהָיָה אִם בֶּאֱלָא אִשְׁתּוֹ אַחִידָה וְשָׁחַת אֶרְצָהּ לְבִלְתִּי נָתֵן זָרַע לְאַחִידָה. וַיֵּרַע בְּעֵינֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיָּמָת גַּם אֹתוֹ.

But Er, Yehuda's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight, and the Lord took his life. Yehuda then said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and fulfill your duty as her brother-in-law. Provide children for your brother." But Onan knew that the children would not be considered his. Whenever he came to his brother's wife, he let his seed go to waste on the ground so as not to have children in his brother's name. What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight, and so He took his life also.

SOURCE 9

Rut 1:5

וַיָּמָוּתוּ גַם שְׁנֵיהֶם מַחֲלֹן וְכִילְיוֹן וַתִּשָּׂאֵר הָאִשָּׁה מְשֻׁנִּי יְלִידָהּ וּמֵאִשָּׁהּ.

After that, the two of them – Machlon and Chilyon – died as well, and the woman was left bereaved of both her children and her husband.

SOURCE 10

Bereishit 38:11

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְתָמָר כְּלָתוֹ שְׁבִי אֵלַימָנָה בֵּית אָבִידָה עַד יִגְדֹל שְׁלָה בְנִי כִּי אָמַר פֶּן יָמוּת גַּם הוּא כְּאָחָיו וְתָלָה תָמָר וַתֵּשֶׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ.

Then Yehuda said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's house until my son Shela grows up" – for he thought he too might die like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

SOURCE 11

Rut 1:11-13

וַתֹּאמֶר נָעָמִי שְׁבִנָה בְּנֹתַי לָמָּה תִּלְכְּנָה עִמִּי הַעוֹד לִי בָנִים בְּמַעַי וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְאִנָּשִׁים. שְׁבִנָה בְּנֹתַי לִכְן כִּי זָמַנְתִּי מֵהָיִית לְאִישׁ כִּי אָמַרְתִּי יֵשׁ לִי תִקְוָה גַם הָיִיתִי הַלֵּילָה לְאִישׁ וְגַם יָלַדְתִּי בָנִים. הֲלֵהוּ תִשְׁבְּרָנָה עַד אֲשֶׁר יִגְדְּלוּ הֲלֵהוּ תַעֲגֹגָה לְבִלְתִּי הָיִית לְאִישׁ אֵל בְּנֹתַי כִּי מִרְ לִי מָאֵד מִכֶּם כִּי יִצְאָה בִּי יָד ה'.

Said Naomi, "Turn back, daughters; why would you come with me? Have I still sons in my womb who could be husbands to you? Turn back, my daughters – go; I am too old to be with a man. Even were I to say, 'There is hope for me still,' were I even this night to be married, even if I could bear sons again, are you to wait for them as they grow? Would you be chained to them, never to be with another man? No, daughters, for your presence is most bitter to me now, for the hand of the Lord has beaten me."

SOURCE 12

Bereishit 38:26

וַיֵּכֶר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי עַל כֵּן לֹא נִתְּתִיהָ לְשֵׁלָה
בְּנִי וְלֹא יָסַף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ.

Yehuda recognised them and said, “She is more righteous than I. It was because I did not give her to Shela my son.” He did not know her intimately again.

SOURCE 13

Rut 4:5

וַיֹּאמֶר בַּעַז בְּיוֹם קְנוֹתָהּ הַשָּׂדֶה מִיַּד נָעֲמִי וּמֵאֵת רוּת הַמוֹאבִּיָּה אִשְׁתְּ הַמֵּת
קָנִיתִי [קָנִיתָהּ] לְהָקִים שֵׁם הַמֵּת עַל נַחֲלָתוֹ.

“On the day you buy that field from Naomi,” said Boaz, “and from Rut the Moabite, you will have bought the wife of a dead man with it, to restore the dead man’s name on his estate.”

SOURCE 14

Bereishit 38:14

וַתֹּסֶר בְּגָדֶי אֱלֻמְנוּתָהּ מֵעָלֶיהָ וַתִּכַּסּ בַּצִּעִף וַתִּתְעַלֶּף וַתֵּשֶׁב בַּפֶּתַח
עֵינַיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל דְּרֹךְ תְּמֻנָּתָהּ כִּי רָאָתָהּ כִּי גָדַל שָׁלָה וְהוּא לֹא נָתַןָהּ
לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה.

And she took off her widow’s clothes and covered herself with a veil. Disguised, she sat at the entrance to Einayim on the road to Timna, for she had seen that Shela was now grown up and yet she had not been given to him as a wife.

SOURCE 15

Rut 3:8-9

וַיְהִי בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּחָרַד הָאִישׁ וַיִּלָּפֶת וַהֲנֶה אִשָּׁה שֹׁכֶבֶת מְרֻגְלָתוֹ.
וַיֹּאמֶר מִי אַתָּה וַתֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי רוּת וּפְרַשְׁתָּ כְנָפְךָ עַל אֲמָתְךָ כִּי
גֹאֵל אָתָּה.

At midnight the man started and turned over – there was a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he said, and she answered, “I am your maidservant Rut – spread your mantle over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer.”

POINT TO PONDER

- What similarities can you find between Rut and Tamar?

There are an overwhelming abundance of similarities between Tamar, and Rut. Let’s examine a few.

- Both stories begin with the senior males (Judah and Elimelech) moving away from their larger family and into a moral or physical decline.
- In both stories, the movers and shakers are the women – Tamar and Rut.
- Both stories involve the death of two sons.
- In both cases, the woman is left as a childless widow, with no possibility of yibum, or Levirate marriage.
- In both cases, the story turns on a non-normative Levirate marriage. Instead of Tamar marrying her brother-in-law, she has a child with her father-in-law. In the case of Rut, she marries Boaz, which is also an unconventional Levirate marriage.



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- In both stories, the women are determined to make sure that the name of their dead husband is perpetuated by having a child that will carry his lineage forward. The women, and not the two men who were obligated, were mindful of the moral duty to perpetuate the names.
- In both stories, the women are required to act daringly in order to achieve their goals.

Ultimately, the most important similarities have to do with the women themselves. Our heroes, the ones whose acts are essential for the perpetuation of the Jewish people are the most marginalised of characters: Childless widowed women, women from foreign and adversarial nations, to whom people denied help. And yet, these two women, at the very margins of society, emerge as heroines and they allow the Jewish story to continue.

SOURCE 16

Rut 4:18-22

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת פֶּרֶץ פֶּרֶץ הוֹלִיד
אֶת חֶצְרוֹן. וְחֶצְרוֹן הוֹלִיד אֶת רֵם
וְרֵם הוֹלִיד אֶת עֲמִינָדָב. וְעֲמִינָדָב
הוֹלִיד אֶת נַחֲשׁוֹן וְנַחֲשׁוֹן הוֹלִיד
אֶת שַׁלְמָה. וְשַׁלְמָה הוֹלִיד אֶת בְּעֹז
וּבְעֹז הוֹלִיד אֶת עֹבֵד. וְעֹבֵד הוֹלִיד
אֶת יִשָּׁי וְיִשָּׁי הוֹלִיד אֶת דָּוִד.

This is the line of Peretz:
Peretz was the father of
Chetzron. Chetzron was the
father of Ram; Ram was
the father of Aminadav.
Aminadav was the father of
Nachshon; Nachshon was
the father of Salma. Salma
was the father of Boaz;
Boaz was the father of
Oved. Oved was the father
of Yishai – and Yishai was
the father of David.

SOURCE 17

I Shmuel 16:1-12

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל שְׁמוּאֵל... אֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל יִשָּׁי בֵּית הַלְחָמִי כִּי רָאִיתִי בְּבָנָיו לִי מֶלֶךְ... וַיְהִי בְּבוֹאָם וַיֵּרָא אֶת אֱלִיאָב
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵף נֶגֶד יְהוָה מְשִׁיחוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל שְׁמוּאֵל אַל תִּבְטֹ אֶל מַרְאֵהוּ וְאֵל גְּבוֹהַּ קוֹמָתוֹ כִּי מֵאַסְתִּיהוּ כִּי לֹא
אֲשֶׁר יֵרָאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאָדָם יֵרָאֶה לְעֵינָיו וְה' יֵרָאֶה לְלִבּוֹ. וַיִּקְרָא יִשָּׁי אֶל אֲבִינָדָב וַיַּעֲבְדֵהוּ לִפְנֵי שְׁמוּאֵל
וַיֹּאמֶר גַּם בָּזָה לֹא בָחַר ה'. וַיַּעֲבֵר יִשָּׁי שִׁמָּה וַיֹּאמֶר גַּם בָּזָה לֹא בָחַר ה'. וַיַּעֲבֵר יִשָּׁי שִׁבְעַת בָּנָיו לִפְנֵי שְׁמוּאֵל
וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל יִשָּׁי לֹא בָחַר ה' בְּאַלֶּהָ. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל יִשָּׁי הֲתִמּוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד שָׂאֵר הַקָּטָן וְהִנֵּה
רָעָה בְּצֹאן וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל יִשָּׁי שְׁלַחְהָ וְקִחְנוּ כִּי לֹא נֹסֵב עַד בָּאוּ פֹה. וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיָּבִיאוּהוּ וְהוּא אֲדָמוּנִי עִם יָפֶה
עֵינָיו וְטוֹב רָאִי וַיֹּאמֶר ה' קוֹם מְשַׁחְהוּ כִּי זֶה הוּא.

The Lord said to Shmuel... I am sending you to Yishai, the Bethlehemite, for I have seen
a king for Me among his sons.” ... When they arrived, he saw Eliav and thought, “Surely
the Lord’s anointed is before Him.” But the Lord said to Shmuel, “Do not look upon
his appearance or his tall bearing, for I have rejected him, not seeing as man does;
for man sees what the eyes see, but the Lord sees into the heart.” Then Yishai called
to Avinadav and passed him before Shmuel, who said, “The Lord has not chosen this
one either.” And when Yishai had Shama pass, he said, “The Lord has not chosen this
one either.” Yishai had his seven sons pass before Shmuel, but Shmuel said to Yishai,
“The Lord has not chosen any of these.” Then Shmuel asked Yishai, “Are there no
other boys?” “There is still the youngest,” he said. “Right now, he is shepherding the
flock.” “Send out to fetch him,” Shmuel said to Yishai, “for we will not move on until
he comes here.” He sent out and brought him; he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes, and
handsome. And the Lord said, “Arise, anoint him – for he is the one.”

POINTS TO PONDER

1. How many generations were there between Peretz and David?
2. Where else do we know of this number of generations between key figures in the Torah?
3. What message is contained in the way David was chosen to be king? Is a similar message found in Megillat Rut?

In The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, the Freudian theory of the origin of the hero is spelled out: A child is about to be born to a royal couple but the king sees the child as a threat. To protect himself from the child, the king arranges for the child to be killed. As it happens, the child isn't killed, but is found and adopted by ordinary, simple people. Eventually, everything that is foretold actually happens. The child grows up, defeats the king, and is subsequently discovered to have royal blood.

This series of events occurs in many heroic stories. But this is not the series of events that happens in the story of Jewish heroes.

In the story of King David, we have two stories about his origin and the key figures are Tamar and Rut. As opposed to coming from royal blood, King David is descended from two marginalised women and he becomes Israel's greatest king.



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The Torah is teaching that your dignity, your strength, and your character don't depend on who you are born to. Every child is special. This is the opposite of the classical origin story of a hero. In this tradition it is not David's birth order

that makes him stand out, but instead, what God sees inside of him. David inherits the legacy of loyalty and kindness, courage and vulnerability from his ancestors Tamar and Rut, and that is why God sees him as fit to rule Israel.

The story of the Jewish people is the story of Tamar and Rut: the story of progression through the kindness of two strong women who were considered outsiders and yet exemplified the middot (character traits) most important to the Jewish people. It was through Tamar and Rut that Israel got King David, its greatest king.

The story of the Book of Rut is thus ultimately an important lesson, crucial to our survival: never write an individual off before you truly see their character.