

Hatzadeket Hazu- This Righteous Woman

By Karen Miller

Megillat Ruth is primarily a story about Ruth's passage, both physically and psychologically, from her native land and nation of Moav to her arrival at a place within the Jewish people. This journey culminates in Ruth's betrothal to Boaz. The presentation of this betrothal story echoes that of Rebecca and Isaac's. A look at these two stories both reveals the uniqueness of these women, and at the same time highlights some of the characteristics exclusively associated with Ruth.

The stories of Rebecca and Ruth share several motifs. In both stories there is a parent, or parent-in-law who initiates the search for the betrothed. In Genesis 24, Abraham sends Eliezer, who is to act on behalf of Isaac, to his homeland to find a wife for his son. In *megillat Ruth*, Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz while he is asleep, and to hint to him that she is interested in marriage. Moreover, both Ruth and Rebecca make an active decision to marry the men who have been suggested to them. Ruth chooses to follow Naomi's instructions. In Genesis 24, Rebecca's brother Laban and Rebecca's mother try to convince Eliezer that Rebecca should stay with them a few more days instead of leaving right away (this won't be the last time Laban tries this). In the end, they resolve that Rebecca should make the decision whether to stay with her family or follow Eliezer to marry Isaac. Rebecca chooses to go.

There are linguistic connections between the stories as well. The word *chesed* (loving-kindness), so closely associated with Ruth, is also emphasized in Genesis 24. Ruth is recognized for the acts of *chesed* she performed for her deceased husband, and for her mother-in-law Naomi. Boaz too praises her *chesed* for acting modestly in the field. Rebecca is also admired in the narrative for her acts of *chesed*, when upon Eliezer's arrival she immediately offers him and then his camels a drink. Furthermore, Naomi and Eliezer both praise God for not withholding *chesed* from them, "Thank God... Who has not withheld His loving-kindness." (Genesis 24:27 and Ruth 2:20) One more linguistic parallel is worth noting. When Eliezer meets Rebecca for the first time and when Boaz is awakened by Ruth, both men ask these women, "Who are you?" (Genesis 24:23 and Ruth 3:9)

Ruth and Rebecca are both characterized as women of action. In both stories there are many verbs associated with the heroines' behavior. "Rebecca came out... and went down to the spring and drew [water]. She quickly lowered her jar and said, 'drink...' and she also watered the camels." (Genesis 24:45-46) Ruth also plays an unusually active role when she goes to Boaz's field to glean. Ruth says to Naomi, "Let me go now to the field and glean..." and then it says, "And she went, and came and gleaned..." (2:2-3).

Why is the Bible drawing our attention to these connections between Ruth and Rebecca? These subtle comparisons are part of *megillat Ruth*'s allusions to Ruth's quasi-matriarchal status. Ruth is following in the footsteps of Rebecca.

To further support this point, the midrash explicitly compares Ruth to Rebecca. At the end of the *megilla*, Boaz is blessed in his marriage to Ruth. The midrash adds to this blessing that Boaz's children should come from "*hatzadeket hazu*," this righteous woman, just as Yitzchak prayed to God that all of his children should come from "*hatzadeket hazu*," referring to Rebecca. (Ruth Rabbah 7:14) Furthermore, *megillat Ruth* broadens the comparison to the matriarchs by holding up Rachel and Leah as role models for Ruth. When Boaz betroths Ruth the witnesses say, "God should make the woman who comes into your house like Rachel and like Leah." (4:11)

While these two narratives are noticeably similar, there are a number of features which are unique to the story of Ruth. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter shows that these are just two of several stories which belong to the biblical betrothal "type-scene." He says that these scenes often have key elements, but at the same time usually contain characteristics that are distinct to each particular story. In the Ruth story there are two unusual elements. First, the man and woman meet in a field rather than at the typical well. Second, in some ways the roles are shifted, and Ruth plays the role commonly associated with the male figure. As Alter points out, she is the one who comes from a foreign place (Moav, just as Eliezer comes from far to meet Rebecca), and Boaz offers Ruth hospitality (just as Rebecca offered Eliezer).

Why does *megillat Ruth* blur the line between these typically distinct male and female roles? Perhaps Ruth is singled out for her exceptional courage. Not only does Ruth leave her home to become part of the Jewish people, but she also takes extra initiative in building a Jewish family. Or, possibly, the *megilla* presents Ruth's character as a role model for everyone – men and women alike. For all of these reasons she truly is "*hatzadeket hazu*."

JOFA wishes you and your family a Chag Shavuot Sameach!