



The mother of kings **BY ROBERT SUSSMAN**

WE ARE ACCUSTOMED TO READING MEGILLAS Rus (the book of Ruth) on Shavuot and there are several reasons for this. One of those reasons is because Shavuot is the *yartzheit* of Dovid HaMelech (King David), therefore we read about his birth and about his forefathers. We all look forward to *Moshiach ben Dovid* and this is one of the fundamentals of our faith. The day will come – soon, please G-d – when we will all be gathered to Eretz Yisrael and there will be no more troubles and illness, no more pain and suffering. The foundation of all of this is: Dovid HaMelech.

Megillas Rus primarily describes Rus the Moavite and Boaz, the *Gadol Hador* (leader of the generation), who took her for a wife and how they merited to have Dovid HaMelech come from them. The

Torah teaches us that if we imitate their beautiful ways, we too will merit children, grandchildren, and descendants who will illuminate the world.

THE ENVIRONMENT HAS CHANGED

One of the difficulties that we have with understanding the *Kesuvim* (the Writings from Tanach, the Hebrew Bible) is that they speak of events that occurred thousands of years ago and the nature of the world has changed. In every city and in every nation, there is a certain environment, certain surroundings that change from time to time and if we don't live in those times, it's difficult for us to understand the stories that transpired in those places and at those times. As a result, we don't understand the majority of stories

in history. This is the greatest problem with understanding the *Kesuvim* because many things that were thousands of years ago appear otherwise today. Therefore, we need to try and enter the environment of this period relevant to *Megillas Rus* and, by so doing, shed light on everything that transpired.

AMON AND MOAV – THE HATED NATIONS OF ISRAEL

Every nation in the world has nations that they consider to be friends and others that they consider to be enemies, earning their utter hatred. For example, even today, almost 80 years since the Holocaust, we still harbour hatred towards the Germans. We need to understand that in the period during which *Megillas Rus* takes place, the most hated nations in the eyes of *Am Yisrael* (the nation of Israel) were: Amon and Moav.



“IN THE EYES OF THE JEWS, ELIMELECH AND HIS SONS WERE CONSIDERED TRAITORS.”

Why was this so?

First of all, their forefathers, Amon and Moav, after whom each of these nations were named, were mamzerim, born from the forbidden relationship between Lot and his two daughters. So we find that, from the very beginning, these two nations were lacking in morality.

These two nations were the lowliest, ugliest, and most unethical that can be. The Torah commands¹ us, “Don’t bring an Amonite or a Moavite into the assembly of Hashem...because they did not welcome you with bread and water when you went out from Egypt, and because they hired Balaam ben Beor...to curse you.” They had no *hakaras hatov* (gratitude) towards *Am Yisrael* for our forefather, Avraham Avinu, having saved their forefather, Lot, when Lot was taken captive in war.

THE PUNISHMENT OF ELIMELECH AND HIS SONS

Elimelech was the *Gadol Hador* (the leader of the generation). He was also very wealthy. When there was a terrible drought, he could not stand to see thousands of Jews starving. If he remained in Eretz Yisrael, he would be forced to sell his storehouses in order to feed everyone and be turned into a poor person. *Am Yisrael* looked to Elimelech to help them in their time of difficulty.

What did Elimelech do? He took his family and left Eretz Yisrael. As if this wasn’t bad enough, it only became worse when we consider their destination: Eretz Moav – to live in the company of the sworn enemies of *Am Yisrael*.

And not only this, but Elimelech’s two sons, Machlon and Kilyon, married

princesses, daughters of the King of Moav, who was only too happy to have his daughters marry such important men from *Am Yisrael*. In the eyes of the Jews, Elimelech and his sons were considered traitors.

A short time passed and these three men, Elimelech and his two sons, died.

SACRIFICING BECAUSE OF LOVE OF HASHEM

Naomi, the wife of Elimelech, was a great *tzadikas* (righteous woman), but she went along with her husband to Moav. And now, she was alone and she knew full well that she was being punished. She turned to her two daughters-in-law and informed them: ‘I am returning to Eretz Yisrael. What has happened to me is enough; I learned a lesson.’ These two princesses, said: ‘We will return with you to your people.’ But, in the end it writes, “Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Rus clung to her.”

We need to understand what was involved in this decision of Rus.



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Shavuot

Rus knew that when she reached Eretz Yisrael, she would receive a particularly cool reception. It would be thrown in her face that she was a Moavite and that she had no right to get married to a Jew. Nevertheless, she had married a Jew and the result was that he died – meaning to say: because of you he died! Everyone would reject her and say: ‘Go from here! A lowly person like you doesn’t have a portion and an inheritance among the Jewish people!’

But Rus loved Hashem and His Torah, and even knowing what awaited her and the reception that she would receive, she still went with Naomi and said to her, “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your G-d, my G-d. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.” ‘I want to be close to *Am Yisrael* because, by doing so, I will be close to Hashem.’

This was truly incredible. Rus was a princess. Her father, the king, expected that she would return to him like her sister Orpah, but instead she went to *Am Yisrael* to soak up shame and curses and there, instead of living a life of comfort in a magnificent palace, she would be forced for her very survival to gather stalks of grain in foreign fields, living a life of utter poverty and lacking.

Sometimes, when a person does an act of *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice), at least somebody appreciates the act. But here, because she was a Moavite, not even one person had a kind word for Rus.

NO MOAVITES ALLOWED

And there was an additional problem. It wasn’t clear at all if Rus would ever be able to marry a Jew. In the Torah it writes

that a Moavite cannot marry a Jew. But what about a female Moavite? This subject was a *machlokes* (dispute) during the generations, and, in this period, the halacha regarding this matter was still not clear, with many convinced that it was never possible for someone from Moav, either man or woman, to marry a Jew.

So we find a woman who gave up all of the benefits and the happy life of living in the palace of the king, and all of this in order that she could draw close to *Am Yisrael* – without a penny to her name, without the ability to build a Jewish home – only because of her enormous love for Hashem!

MOTHER OF KINGS

Because of this greatness, Rus merited the description² “*ima shal malchus*” “mother of kings”. Were it not for Rus, there would be no Dovid HaMelech and there would be no *Moshiach*. In order to merit that the *Melech HaMoshiach* – the most beloved son of Hashem – would go out into the world, it required a mother with enormous love for Hashem, a love that would cause her to give up literally everything, solely from her love for Hashem.

Naomi tried to convince Rus to return: ‘It’s enough for you; nothing is expected of you; there will not be a husband for you, only shame and lowliness will be your portion.’ But Rus would not go: ‘I will not separate from you until the day I die and, even then, I will be buried with you, because you are my teacher; I will not be disconnected from you in any way.’

NAOMI AND RUS IN BEIS LECHEM

So Naomi and Rus travelled to Beis Lechem. In this period, Boaz was the

Gadol Hador, the *Nasi* (prince), a man who was old in years, in his 80s, with an extensive family, who was recognised and respected. He was also a *shofeit* (judge) and very wealthy.

On the day that Naomi and Rus returned to Beis Lechem, the wife of Boaz had died and all of *Am Yisrael* joined in her funeral. In the middle of the funeral, Naomi and Rus entered and, as expected, “the whole city made a noise about them”. They were rebuked – “...the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” They saw what had happened to Naomi, who previously had been the wealthiest woman in all the land. ‘And everything that happened was because she abandoned us and betrayed us. And look who came after her; look who she brought with her – a Moavite!’

Naomi and Rus needed to eat, so Rus went out to gather grain in the fields for them. The *Megillah* tells us of the attitude of Boaz towards Rus, “I have instructed the men not to bother you” because if he did not say this to them, they would have thrown her out of his fields because she was a Moavite. She suffered all of this contempt in silence, gathering a little food for herself and her mother-in-law.

BOAZ LIFTED THE SPIRIT OF RUS

Although the Moavites were despised and hated in the eyes of all Jews, Boaz recognised that Rus was someone special, taking note of her being upright and modest. He said to her, “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 that you had not known before. May Hashem reward your deeds and may you have a full recompense from Hashem, the G-d of Israel, under whose wings you come to seek refuge.”

He said to her: ‘My daughter, I know that you left your parents, your family, and all the royal treasures, and have come to take shelter under the wings of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence). You are a wonderful woman who is walking in the

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“BOAZ POSSESSED STERLING CHARACTER, GOING OUT OF HIS WAY TO UPLIFT HER. HE WAS STILL NOT SO CERTAIN ABOUT HER FITNESS TO COME INTO THE ASSEMBLY OF ISRAEL BECAUSE, AFTER ALL, SHE WAS A MOAVITE, BUT HE SAID TO HER THINGS THAT CAUSED HER HEART TO REJOICE AND HELPED HER AS MUCH AS HE COULD.”

footsteps of our holy matriarchs and Hashem will be with you.’ This was the first time that Rus heard words that uplifted her spirit.

Rus was very excited. “And she said, ‘May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord, because you have comforted me, and because you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant.’ ‘Do you know to whom you are speaking? To a Moavite! Never have I heard words like these. I have only absorbed contempt and disdain. Suddenly, the *Gadol Hador* doesn’t have anyone with whom to speak

other than a despicable person like me!’

And Boaz added: ‘I have instructed my servants not to bother you and if someone harms you, speak to me. Also, you are invited to be a guest at my table.’ He wasn’t satisfied with all of this: “Boaz ordered his servants saying, ‘Let her gather among the sheaves; do not embarrass her. Also, pull out for her from the sheaves [ie. deliberately] and leave them for her to take and don’t berate her.’”

Boaz possessed sterling character, going out of his way to uplift her. He was

still not so certain about her fitness to come into the assembly of Israel because, after all, she was a Moavite, but he said to her things that caused her heart to rejoice and helped her as much as he could.

NAOMI’S REQUEST TO RUTH

We now come to a very deep point. When a man dies after he has had children, the children are considered a continuation of him. Machlon and Kilyon did not have children. The Torah teaches us that there is a way to build up the name of a man who dies without children and this is a tremendous chesed with the man’s *neshama* (soul) and this is through fulfilling the mitzvah of *yibum* (levirate marriage).

Originally, *yibum* was fulfilled though a man’s closest relative – his father, where the father would marry the wife of his deceased son. But the Torah prohibited this and made it a mitzvah exclusively on the brother of the deceased man. In

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any case, it was considered a great matter for one of the relatives of the deceased to marry his wife and build up for him a name in the world.

Technically speaking, *yibum* wasn't possible for Rus because there were no other brothers with whom to do it. This idea that she should marry one of Machlon's relatives was only a spiritual perception of Naomi, who sought to save the *neshama* of her son because he was a great man.

Naomi thought that if one of Machlon's relatives would marry Rus, this would be something great for Machlon's *neshama* even though, according to the halacha, there was no obligation for anyone to do so at all. Therefore, she said to Rus: 'I'm not able to command you; I can only make a suggestion. Boaz is our cousin [Boaz was the son of Elimelech's brother, Salmon³, making him a first cousin to Machlon]. I know that he is very old, but if you married him, this would be something great for the *neshama* of my son.'

Naturally, Rus should have said: 'I'm not interested in marrying a cousin, an old man over the age of 80, and there's no obligation for me to do so. I'm still

young and I want to build a home.' But Rus didn't think about anything. She informed Naomi: 'All that you have asked me, I will do!' This was the wondrous nature of Rus. She was prepared to sacrifice everything to be Jewish. Therefore, she merited to be "the mother of kings" of the Jewish people.

BOAZ'S INCREDIBLE GREATNESS

After Rus expressed her agreement, Naomi worked on arranging the *shidduch* (match) between Rus and Boaz. It wasn't possible to work in the usual way and to send a *shadchan* (matchmaker) to Boaz to suggest this young woman to him because no one in his right might would go to Boaz, the *Gadol Hador*, and propose such a thing. Just the suggestion alone would be an insult.

The only way was to approach Boaz himself, because he would certainly recognize the value of the special character of Rus. Therefore, Naomi said to Rus: 'Boaz sleeps on the threshing floor at night. Go to him and he'll tell you what to do.'

So Rus returned to Boaz. Just the day

before, Boaz had seen a woman gathering in his field and he noticed that she was modest and he spoke with her words of encouragement, then suddenly, in the middle of the night, he sees her lying at his feet! What would anyone do in a situation like this? He would cry out: 'A non-Jew like you, get out of here! Now I see that you are from the Moavites and despicable like them!'

If he would have said this, Dovid HaMelech would never have come into the world and there would also not have been a *Melech HaMoshiach*!

But Boaz had such sterling character. He stopped himself. He didn't become angry, but turned to her and asked her to clarify what was going on: "Who are you?" "What are you doing here? Explain yourself!" And she answered: 'I've come to save a *neshama*, the *neshama* of my deceased husband.' Boaz heard this and admired it very much: "He said to her, 'You are blessed of Hashem, my daughter. Your latest chesed is even greater than your first.'" "This act is more beautiful than all that you have done until now."

A MIRACLE

In the Midrash, our Sages teach⁴ that the response of Boaz was really a *neis* (miracle): "[Dovid HaMelech wrote in Tehillim⁵] 'At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You because of Your righteous judgments' – the judgments that You brought upon the Amonites and the Moavites, and the righteousness that You did with my grandfather and with my grandmother [ie. Boaz and Rus], for had he [Boaz] hurried to curse her [Rus] even once, where would I [Dovid HaMelech] have come from? And it wasn't enough that he didn't curse her, but he blessed her, as it says, 'You are blessed of Hashem, my daughter.'"

Dovid HaMelech would rise each night at midnight to give thanks that his grandfather did not say a single harsh word to his grandmother when she came to him in the field. This was in the category of great miracles. Only a venerable person like Boaz was fit to behave in such a manner.



On the other hand, Rus's devotion to Hashem was also unparalleled. If Naomi would not have sent her, Rus would not have done such a thing under any circumstances. It would be better for her to die than to do something like this. But Naomi said to her: 'You have a mission, go and save a Jewish soul.' There was great danger in what she did. Rus knew that if Boaz cursed her – even one curse – this would be the end of her; she would be lost forever. But she did not flinch from anything because Naomi sent her.

From these two lofty people came Dovid HaMelech!

THE ZEALOUSNESS OF BOAZ IN FULFILLING A MITZVAH

The next morning, Boaz did not delay at all. He gathered the elders of the generation and told them what had happened with Naomi and Rus, and the need to build the family. An additional person was present: *Ploni Almoni* ("an anonymous person", who the gemara⁶ explains was a brother of Elimelech, ie. an uncle to Boaz), who, in terms of family connection, was a closer relative to Machlon than Boaz. Boaz suggested to *Ploni Almoni* to buy the ancestral inheritance, the field belonging to Naomi's family, in order that it would remain within the family, but, together with this, the purchaser of the field would need to marry Rus.

Ploni Almoni, the closest redeemer, was not interested because it was not clear whether marrying Rus was permissible, as the halacha still had not been determined. He worried that perhaps one day they would say that such a thing was not permitted and his children from that relationship would not be considered Jewish.

But Boaz knew how the halacha would be decided⁷; he knew that there was a halacha *l'Moshe miSinai* (a Torah law that

had been orally transmitted to Moshe by Hashem on Har Sinai) that a Moavite man was forever barred from joining *Am Yisrael*, but that it was permissible for a Moavite woman to convert and marry a Jew. So he proceeded without any worry in order to do a chesed with a Jewish *neshama*. When he decided to do this, he didn't wait even a single day. That very night, a chuppah was arranged and Boaz and Rus were married, and before the next morning came, Boaz was dead. Had he waited even a single day, had he said: 'This is a mitzvah, but there's no need to hurry' – Dovid HaMelech would not have been born!

ACCEPTING THINGS WITH LOVE

When Rus saw that Boaz had died, she should have lifted her eyes to heaven and said: 'Master of the Universe, is this what I deserve? I'm a princess. I lived in majestic palaces. I gave up everything. I came to Eretz Yisrael by foot, despite being able to travel in a carriage. When I arrived, I received a cold reception, everyone humiliated me, but this didn't concern me, the main thing was to be close to *Am Yisrael*. And Naomi, my teacher, said to me that I should marry this old man for the sake of her son because only this could save his *neshama*, and so I did this too. I married him and now he is dead. Is this what I deserve, Hashem?'

But Rus didn't get angry; she accepted everything from Hashem with love. And when her son was born, she took him to Naomi, her mother-in-law, and said: 'My dear mother-in-law, this son who was born to me has the *neshama* of your son, my husband who died. Baruch Hashem, we fulfilled the mitzvah completely.'

Rus merited seeing with her eyes not only Dovid HaMelech, but also his son,

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon), as well as the Beis HaMikdash (Temple). Our Sages say⁸, "Rus the Moavite saw the kingship of Shlomo, the grandson of her grandson, as it says⁹, '...he [Shlomo HaMelech] had a throne placed for the queen mother...', and Rabbi Elazar said: for the mother of kings [Rus]." After all that Rus suffered, after her incredible devotion to Hashem and to His Torah, she merited to get *nachas* and to see the Beis HaMikdash that her descendent, Shlomo HaMelech, built, as well as *Am Yisrael* in all its glory.

THE LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE MEGILLAH

Rus proved to *Am Yisrael* that the true character of a Jew is not something that must be inherited. Despite her being from the lowliest of nations, she merited to develop refined character and to perfect her character traits – to teach us that we don't need to learn such things from our parents. If a person will acquire and perfect for himself the quality of chesed, like Rus did, it's in his power to bring *Moshiach* into the world. We see too that Hashem does not forget our devotion to Him in dark times, and that, in the end, there will be light and joy for one so devoted, just like there was for Rus. And from Boaz we can learn to emulate the great quality of not getting angry immediately – to know when to control ourselves; to be careful not to step on people and not to insult their failings; and to be zealous whenever a mitzvah comes into our hands. ■

*Based on Tiferes Shimshon al HaTorah
Bamidbar – Chag HaShavuot*

¹Devarim 23:4

²Bava Basra 91b

³See Rashi on Rus 2:1

⁴Rus Rabah 6:1

⁵Tehillim 119:62

⁶Bava Basra 91a (The gemara also notes that Naomi was the daughter of another brother of Elimelech, making her a cousin to Boaz, in addition to being his aunt by marriage to Elimelech.)

⁷See Yevamos 76b and 77a

⁸Bava Basra 91b

⁹Melachim I 2:19 and Rashi there

“DOVID HAMELECH WOULD RISE EACH NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT TO GIVE THANKS THAT HIS GRANDFATHER DID NOT SAY A SINGLE HARSH WORD TO HIS GRANDMOTHER WHEN SHE CAME TO HIM IN THE FIELD.”