

Reading portions from the Holy Scripture is as important in Jewish liturgy as prayers. In fact, the tradition of public readings is more ancient than public prayers, which replaced sacrifices in the Holy Temple. We know from the Tanakh itself that public Tora readings were introduced short after the return from the Babylonian Exile, during the time of Nehemiah.¹ Beside the Tora, i.e. the five books or better to say the five scrolls of Moses, there are five other scrolls, megilloth that also take very important roles in Jewish liturgy: Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), Megillat Esther, Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs), Megillat Ruth and Eicha (Lamentation). Each megilla contribute greatly to the solemnity of a certain feast or in the case of Eicha to the deepness of the public fast on Tisha beAv.

It is also the Tanakh itself that emphasizes the importance of understanding the Holy Script in its fullness while reading or listening to its texts. We read in Nehemia 8 that it was important for the men who were reading the Torah publicly that the people who were listening to it in solemn awe would understand its texts fully: *“So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”* (Nehemia 8:8)²

The reading of Megillath Ruth, in the liturgy of the second of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals, in the liturgy of *Hag HaShavuot*, is one of the highlights of the feast. It takes place on the second day of Shavuot before reading of the Torah.³ This is the time when we celebrate the Giving of the Torah to the Jewish people, that is why it is mentioned as *Zman Matan Toratenu*. The other name of the festival is Feast of the Wheat Harvest, *Hag HaKatzir*.

Its lyrical story about a young woman, who converted to Judaism and found consolation among her new people after losing her husband and leaving her family behind in Moab, brings us back to ancient times when gathering the crops belonged to the central part of the life of a community. Its result could determine the fate of a people, its good luck or bad fortune. For many of us in the 21st century, it could be rather difficult to cope with the huge gap in time, culture between the world of the Biblical text and our everyday surroundings in the 21st century. As a result of this, it might block our true understanding of the main message of this important reading.⁴

The Book of Ruth is not only a part of our important cultural heritage but also a very attractive story with lyrical scenes in it. It is rather short and even readers with a lower level of Hebrew knowledge could successfully cope with it. The story contains a lot of important information, with the help of which one can get a vivid picture of the ancient life in the Land of Israel.⁵

¹ Nehemia 8

² וַיִּקְרְאוּ בַסֵּפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים מִפֶּתֶחַ שַׁעַר וַיְבִינֵנוּ בַמִּקְרָא

Translation: A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text – Hebrew and English, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv 1996

³ *“The custom is mentioned in Masekhet Soferim (14:16), and the fact that the first chapter of Midrahs Ruth deals with the giving of the Torah, is evidence that this custom was already established in the period when this Midrash was compiled. (Dunsky, Midrash Ruth, p.3).”* In Klein, I., A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, Moreshet Series 6, New York, 1979, p. 150; See also: Oláh, Judaism, Budapest, 2005 (Hungarian), pp. 58-59.

⁴ דיטשר, אהרון ופרנקל, מרלה, הבנת המקרא בימינו: סוגיות בהוראתו (עיונים בחינוך היהודי כרך ט, (הוצאת מאגנס,

2004

⁵ ברקאי, יאיר, האישה במקרא – דמויות ותמויות בתוך 'מים מדליו' שנתנו המכללה הדתית למורים ע"ש ליפשיץ, י"ם, 14

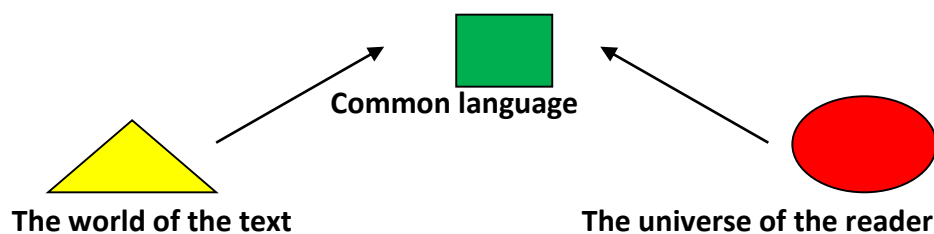
What are those significant motifs in the Scroll of Ruth, which can be problematic for readers in the 21st century's Europe to fully understand, and without which the entire story cannot be comprehended?

The first one is the Thoraic law of **Peoth**. In other words: why did Ruth go after the reapers to collect the left-over barley?

The other subject is concept of the **Yibum**, the compulsion of marrying the widow by the late husband's closest relative.

In order to bridge the gap between the 3000-year old world of the text and the present universe of the readers we must find a **common language**, which *will not* distort the message of the text. (See **Figure 1**)

Figure 1:



The Mosaic Law of *Peoth* in *Megillath Ruth*

The text: Megillat Ruth, chapters 1:22 and 2:2-3,

“So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.”

“And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace. And she said unto her, Go my daughter.

And she went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was the kindred of Elimelech.”⁶

The world of the Book of Ruth

As we know, the story of Ruth took place during a period, which is known as the time of the Judges in the heart of the territory of the tribe of Judah, in the town of Bethlehem and in the fields around it. The law of the ancient Israelites was the written Torah. There are two places in Leviticus, *Book of Vayyikra*, where we can read about the law of leaving some of the crops to the needy and the poor, in chapters 19:9-10 and 23:22,

“And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.

And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather the single grapes of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God”

⁶ Translation: A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text – Hebrew and English, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv 1996

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“And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleanings of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the Lord your God.”⁷

This custom was practiced until the Jews owned fields, and their livelihood was based on agriculture. So, even in times, after the period of the Judges it was unnecessary to explain Ruth's words to the readers, that is what she meant by *gleaning after the harvesters*.

The universe of the present day readers

Agriculture ceased to be the central part of the economy even in Eastern Europe. City dwellers can easily conduct their everyday lives without having any basic agricultural knowledge. Even visiting the fields and watching a real harvest would not help us to gain any idea about the old type harvesters there. Thus taking these facts into consideration, one can face real difficulties in trying to understand why and how Ruth went to collect grains in the field after the harvesters.

The possible common language

In the light of the reality described above, it is obvious that understanding the following sentence, i.e. Ruth's request, is rather problematic: *Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace*. The word to word translation of the Hebrew text could be even more confusing for those not having the background information, which is as follows: the Torah deals with social justice in a very detailed manner. Therefore, in order to appreciate Boaz's attitude towards Ruth, that he accepted her endeavour to gather the fallen ears, one has to know that the main meaning of **gleaning** (**לקלט**) is to create **social justice**, by giving some of the crops to the needy. Readers living in the 21st century are able to understand the social concern of the Torah, as we can see in Deuteronomy, the Book of Devarim, chapter 24:19,

“When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand.”⁸

People know from their everyday life the importance of social security and social care. In this way, via the concept of social justice, which occurred in the Torah more than 3000 years ago, we can find the common language which could close the gap.

⁷ Translation: A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text – Hebrew and English, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv 1996

⁸ Translation: A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text – Hebrew and English, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv 1996

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The Mosaic Law of *Yibbum* (Levirate)

The text: Megillath Ruth, chapter 3:8-9,

“And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and behold, a woman lay at his feet.

And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: Spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid, for thou art a near kinsman.”⁹

The implementation of the Law of the *Yibbum* in the time of Megillath Ruth

The story of Ruth brings us back to the time of the Judges, when apparently the Laws of the Torah were in full force. So was the ruling about the “*establishing a name for a dead husband by his closest male relative*”, who was supposed to fill the role of the *goel*, i.e. a redeemer as we read in Deuteronomy, chapter 25:5,

“If brethren dwell together, and one of them dies and has no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry with a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother unto her.”¹⁰

In its time this law – similarly to the law of the peoth – had a certain meaning of social care, i.e. a widow was not abandoned but she was taken care of by the late husband’s family.

The reader’s understanding of the Levirate Law in the 21st century Europe

In our era in Europe one can have great difficulties to comprehend the meaning of the Levirate as it is. In our eyes it tends to be seen as primitive, outdated and repulsive – especially for girls, who think that it considers women as properties.

In fact, with Rabbenu Gershom’s halakhic ruling against polygamy, the law of Levirate has been a rather problematic issue in the Ashkenaz community since the Middle Ages. So it would be erroneous to state that it has been a common practice until recently.

On the other hand, families nowadays, are nuclear families, consisting of parents and children, only. Grandparents often live in a different place, let alone distant relatives. Thus, a modern person, belonging to the Western social pattern, has lost the sense of the protection of a big family. Even in family centred Jewish circles this is true, especially in the post-Shoa generation.

⁹ Translation: A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text – Hebrew and English, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv 1996

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Common language

It is very important to understand the role of Boaz as a *goel*: it is not just another nice, romantic love story. His appearance is the **social concern of the Jewish law**. It seems that as a common language the conception of social security occurs repeatedly, describing the helpless, vulnerable situation of a widow in the ancient Middle East. Readers are generally aware of the different war-situations, refugee problems in the world, they can see broadcast in television, news and documentaries in the internet, where people flee from their homes, without any protection. In these situations children and women can be easily subjects to violence and abuse. It is obvious: where there are no laws, social justice system, it is always the weaker, who suffer the most. In the light of this, the readers can see that Boaz was not just “a handsome guy” in Ruth’s eyes but also he meant protection and security for her, and for Naomi, of course.

Why is it important to consider Ruth and Boaz’s story more than a romantic love story? The reason is that actually from this relationship will emerge one of the most significant families in the Jewish history: the *house of David*.

After the fatal and most tragic event of the 20th century, the Jewish communities of Europe and especially Eastern Europe are experiencing a real rebirth, a cultural, religious and emotional renaissance. People are discovering the deeper meaning of their Jewish identity, youngsters forward the message about halakhic rules - which they learned at school – to their parents, and the older generation started to feel free to talk about the old traditions, minhagim in their local Jewish communities. Therefore it is essential to introduce traditional texts, especially those ones which play important roles in Jewish liturgy, with great care and wisdom so that the young generation will be even more enthusiastic about their Jewish identities.

A Szerzőről

Kárpáti Judit, PhD az Országos Rabbiképző – Zsidó Egyetem docense. Doktori disszertációjában az arab országok zsidóságának történelmi tényeit górcső alá véve tekinti át az arab – zsidó együttélés békés és kevésbé békés évszázadait, melyet 2009-ben védett meg. Érdeklődési körének fókuszában a jemeni zsidók története és jelenkori sorsa áll, de cikkeiben foglalkozik az észak-afrikai, iraki, szíriai zsidósággal is. Az utóbbi időben az askenáz és a keleti zsidóság liturgiájának különféle aspektusai is vizsgálódási körébe kerültek.

About the Author

Karpati, Judit, PhD, associate professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary – University of Jewish Studies in Budapest. In her dissertation (2009) she focuses on the destiny of the Jews in Arab lands during peaceful and during troubled times. Her main interest is the fate of the Jews of Yemen but she also publishes articles on the Jewish – Arab coexistence in North Africa, Iraq and Syria in the past. Recently she focuses on the different aspects of Jewish liturgy with the Ashkenazic and also in the Oriental communities.

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ABSTRACT

Reading from the Holy Scripture is an integral part of Jewish liturgy. Its origin dates back to Biblical times. In this essay the author focuses on one of the five scrolls, megillot that are solemnly read publicly on five different festivals / fasting day together with the Torah: that is the Scroll of Ruth, Megillat Ruth, the festive reading of Shavuot. This wonderful lyrical story is very suitable for demonstrating how difficult it is to understand the biblical message of even a short story because of the huge gap in time and culture. The author, with her didactical background knowledge gained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from famous scholars (Prof. Aharon Dietcher and Prof. Yair Barkai), demonstrates her suggestions for bridging the gaps in two problematic issues within the text of Megillat Ruth: the concept of the Peah and the law of Yibbum (Levirate).

ABSZTRAKT

A zsinagógai liturgia integráns részét képezi a tanakhi szövegek olvasása. A Tóra nyilvános felolvasásáról maga a Szentírás tudósít Nehemia könyvének 8. fejezetében. A tóraolvasás mellett zarándokünnepeinken, purimkor és a tisa beávi böjt idején egy másik tekercsből is olvasunk, természetesen minden alkalomkor mást. A szerző a savuoti zarándokünnepünknek ünnepi olvasmányán, Ruth tekercsén keresztül mutatja be, milyen nehéz még ezt szép, lírai, rövid történetet is megfelelően értelmezni a ma emberének a bibliai idők időbeni és kulturális távolsága miatt. A jeruzsálemi Héber Egyetemen szerzett didaktikai tudását alkalmazva, a szerző a tekercsben központi szerepet játszó, két vallási fogalom példáját felhasználva demonstrálja az időbeli és kulturális szakadék áthidalásának lehetőségét.

Kulcsszavak: Megillát Ruth, peah (a szélek meghagyása), jibbum (sógorházasság)

Útmutatás azok számára, akik a cikket idézni kívánják:

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