

## Shavuot

# Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History

### Yael Keller

When I spent my gap year in Israel, my father sent me an unusual present. I received a white t-shirt with the quote “well-behaved women seldom make history” boldly written across it. I was embarrassed, thinking my fun loving, envelope-pushing father was telling me not to be such a goody two-shoes and quickly stuffed it in the back of my closet.

Reflecting over a decade later, I think I better understand the message he was trying to send me. He, a man who liked to walk outside the lines, was encouraging me to find my own ways to make history. Not to forget that sometimes it is OK to behave in unexpected ways in service of a greater vision.

This year, memorializing my father’s third *yartzehit* so close to Shavuot and the reading of Megillat Rut, I thought perhaps Rut could wear the t-shirt, embodying the quote written on it. Rut propelled herself into history, becoming the maternal line to David haMelech. How did she get there? What about Rut enabled her to become such an integral part of our history?

Rut was a woman with strong vision – a vision that included a connection to god and one that also tethered her to a sense of justice and her family. We see this strong character the first time Rut face tragedy in the megillah. After her husband and the other male figures in her new family pass away, young and perhaps suddenly, Rut must reimagine her entire life. She and her sister-in-law, Orpah, accompany Naomi as she returns to Bet Lehem. When Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their own families to start anew, Rut protests. Echoing the story of Avraham Avinu, she journeys into the unknown, to a people and land she doesn’t know, but returning to a God she feels strongly connected to. She doesn’t just say I will go where you go, sleep where you sleep, but *עַמִּי עִמִּי*, (your nation is my nation) and *וְאֱלֹהֵיךָ אֱלֹהֵי* (your god is my god). Boaz later reinforces the reference, using language from Avraham’s story – in perek bet, pasuk yud aleph he commends Rut for leaving her *מִן־מִוֹלְדֹתַי וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֹתַי* - her parents and birth place to go to a place she did not know. Just as Avraham was told *לְךָ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמוֹלְדֹתַי וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ* to a place I will show you or is unknown to you.

Rut had a choice at that moment. She could have done the “well-behaved” thing, kissed Naomi, as Orpah had and gone back to her family, her culture, her community to start a new family. Instead, she left all that was familiar and bucked community norms to go with her mother-in-law to Beit Lehem. It seems clear to me from the textual hints that Rut heard a divine calling, a vision that her future lot was intertwined with B’nei Yisrael. Like Avraham, this was certainly not expected behavior.

Of course, to make history you need more than a good vision. You need action. Rut uses future tense language throughout the entire megillah. Aviva Zorenberg suggests this linguistic habit gives us a window to Rut’s approach to life. Rut is a woman who sees what can be, she faces forward and has a positive outlook. She acts as a counter-balance to Naomi, a woman closed off from any possible future happiness or family line, telling her daughters in law that she is too old for a new

husband and new children. She goes so far as to rename herself Marah for כִּי־הִמַּר שָׂדֵי לִי מָאֵד – God has dealt bitterly with me. Rut, despite losing her husband and traveling to a place with many unknowns, chooses to focus on her vision and actualizes it using this future language. Notably, when Boaz wakes up to see Rut on the threshing floor, she responds to his startled question – who are you – saying וּפְרָשְׁתָּ כְנָפֶיךָ (you will spread your cloak over me). Not a directive “do it” or a question “can you do it?” but “you will do it.” – a prediction made with quiet confidence that helped Boaz take his own, unexpected step in redeeming her.

Perhaps responding to her character, Boaz calls Rut an *eishet chayil*. Since this term, *eishet chayil*, only appears once in tanach, commentators turn to other uses of the word *chayil* to determine its meaning. The term *anshei chayil* appears in two places – once at the end of Breishit in parshat Vayigash, and once in shmot in parshat Yitro. Most commentators understand this term in both places to describe someone with leadership skills, focusing on their military prowess. However, the Rashbam and Ramban expand our understanding. The Rashbam, commenting in parshat vayigash (breishit 47:6), says the word reflects on both the **ability** and **integrity** of the person. In parshat yitro (shmot 18:21) the Ramban says this may not be about being a military leader, but describes one who has great wisdom.

He also calls it a *zrizut*, meaning alert or energetic. Aviva Zorenberg sees this *zrizut* as a fearlessness to be, in spite of challenges and fear that surround Rut, both physically and emotionally someone who is in control of her destiny. Rut is an *eishet chayil*, a forward thinker who can overcome fear and uncertainty to achieve her goals. *Eishet Chayil* is often thought of as an antifeminist concept – a woman, stuck in her home relegated to household tasks. Thinking of Rut as the original *eishet chayil*, full of *zrizut* and creating change and history around her, allows to imbue the title with feminist power.

These characteristics allow Rut to overcome public stigma and expectation to behave in an unexpected fashion. She is able to honor her vision to heed god’s call, leaving her people and family to return to Beit Lehem. She is able to take action, going to Boaz, in perhaps a scandalous fashion, to ensure she has continuity of family.

Yael Ziegler explains in her book “Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy” that Rut’s behavior fits into a much larger tradition of biblical women who are not well-behaved to change history. Rut’s plan to seduce, or at least deceive, the male protagonist, is strikingly similar to both the story of Lot’s daughters and Lot and Tamar and Yehudah. In each story, the woman or women learn they have little chance of continuing their bloodline due to outside circumstance. Instead of going through the proper channels to find a new husband each woman engages in a secret plan to deceive the male protagonist. Additionally, each story begins when the male protagonist – Lot, Yehudah, Elimelch makes a poor choice. They choose to leave their community, which supports and grounds them, to move their family to a place of dubious moral character. Because they take their family to Sodom, Canaan and Maob respectively, they lose their way, morally, and risk ending their family line. The women of the story refuse to surrender to this fate, taking bold action to ensure enduring continuity.

Zeigler concludes that the women engage in “unconventional, morally questionable behaviors in order to obtain continuity” creating a legacy for the Davidic dynasty and our ability to bring mashiach, rooted in the “courage and determination to bring continuity.” I would take it one step further and say this legacy is rooted in the courage and determination to do what is right and just, to walk with/follow after God and create meaning and connection in life.

The quote my father sent me was by a woman named Laura Thatcher Ulrich, a professor at Harvard, in the 1970s. When it was singled out of the academic article she wrote and put on mugs, bumper stickers and, of course, t-shirts like mine she wrote a book about the phrase. She said “I hope that someone would take away from this ... that ordinary people could have an impact, and to try doing the unexpected. I would like to show that history is something that one can contribute to.”

I can think of no greater message from the book of Rut and no better legacy for my father to leave me. My father was nothing if not unexpected and he touched many lives for that reason. A very small example – shortly before he passed away he decided to lead the end of musaf – ein kelokeinu, anim zmirot and aleinu, from the bima. In my shul, this is a tafkid reserved for young boys, learning to lead davening. Growing up in a non-Orthodox shul, my father had never gotten to do this job, usually reserved for children and once he became orthodox he had missed his chance. So, although he had led other parts of davening before, he felt a calling to get to lead the community in this part of tefillah. At 56 or 57 my father decided there was no reason to let age stand in his way. So, one Shabbat morning my father ascended the bima as I tried to sink into the floor. I was mortified that my father would do the unexpected, something so outside of normal. That was a kid’s job.

However, at Kiddush several people came up to me, expressing their admiration at my father’s gutsy determination. They felt my father demonstrated a deep connection to tefillah and inspired them to think about how to take on new things in their own practice.

To think that Rut, a woman, a foreigner (a Moabite no less) and someone unmarried, with no male relatives to speak of, could do the unexpected and contribute to history in such a meaningful way, can be seen as a challenge: When we face adversary or narrow thinking, we could step down, remove ourselves and fade into the past or we can try the unexpected and change the face of history. Not everyone has the zcut to take such a large place in our tradition, but we can certainly aspire to change our communities’ history, our family’s, our own. I know that, at the very least, it’s time to dust off my t-shirt and honor my father’s legacy in this way.



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