HALAKHAH AND HESED IN RUTH

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The Book of Ruth is not a halakhic work in the traditional sense. It contains no direct legal instructions, and its narrative flows without explicit reference to the Torah's commandments. Yet halakhic undercurrents not only shape the story—they reveal the Torah's vision of law as covenantal kindness, evolving through narrative and culture.

The Law of Yibbum and Its Transformation

At the heart of Ruth lies a situation that evokes yibbum, the levirate marriage described in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. The Torah commands a surviving brother to marry his deceased brother's childless widow to preserve the deceased's name in Israel. But the levirate obligation stands in tension with earlier prohibitions. The verses in Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 forbid sexual relations with a brother's wife, and threatens childlessness as punishment.

The Mekhilta (Yitro BaHodesh 7) resolves this contradiction by noting that God uttered these opposing commands “in a single utterance.” Here, the Torah itself contains dialectical elements that require rabbinic harmonization through the Oral Law. Hizkuni offers the principle ha-peh she-asar hu ha-peh she-hittir—the same mouth that forbade also permitted (i.e., God), under specific conditions.

Although rabbinic law harmonized the verses, Karaites—who follow only the Written Law and reject the Oral Law—interpret Leviticus as unequivocally prohibiting a man from marrying his sister-in-law under all circumstances. They interpret Deuteronomy as referring not to literal brothers, but to paternal kinsmen. According to this view, Boaz’s act was not an extra-legal custom, but actual yibbum through a different reading of Torah law.

Yet, as Ibn Ezra notes, the peshat of Ruth challenges that view. Boaz is never called a yabam, but a go’el—a redeemer. Ruth 1:15 refers to Orpah as Ruth’s yevamah, in the specific sense of “sister-in-law.” Onan, Er’s brother in Genesis chapter 38, also is called upon to perform yibbum (Genesis 38:8). Moreover, Boaz remarks that Ruth could have chosen to marry anyone (Ruth 3:10), which would not have been permissible if yibbum were in play. Naomi’s own words to Ruth—“even if I had sons, would you wait until they grew up?” (Ruth 1:11)—refers to an actual brother.

Ramban (on Genesis 38:8) suggests that while the Torah did not command Boaz to perform yibbum, Judean society so valued family continuity and loyalty that it adopted a local practice of kin-based redemption, extending yibbum-like obligations to

close male
relatives who were not prohibited by the Torah's laws. This local practice—connected to
field redemption (ge'ulah)—becomes central to Ruth's story.

Name and Inheritance: Halakhic and Narrative Layers

Beyond the question of marriage law, the narrative also raises halakhic questions about name preservation and land inheritance. The Torah speaks of le-hakim shem,
raising up a name for the deceased. But what does "name" mean? Yevamot 24a and later
commentators suggest that the goal is not literal naming, but preserving property and

continuity. This is not about naming the child Mahlon, but about retaining Mahlon's
family's portion and title in the land. This meaning of shem appears elsewhere in Tanakh,
as well. For example, the daughters of Zelophehad attempt to preserve their deceased
father's name=title through land inheritance: "Let not our father's name (shem) be lost to
his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!"
(Numbers 27:4).

Ramban notes further that Boaz and Ruth name their child Obed, not Mahlon. Tamar, similarly, gives birth to Perez and Zerah—and does not name them Er (her first
husband). Ibn Caspi, however, takes the literal reading seriously and proposes that Ruth
did in fact name her son Mahlon, while the townsfolk overrode her and called him Obed—a unique moment in Tanakh where outsiders name a child.

This connects to inheritance law. Mishnah Yevamot 4:7 and Rambam (Hilkhot Nahalot 3:7) rule that a brother inherits his brother's land. Thus, the role of

yibbum or
ge’ulah in Ruth is not only romantic or redemptive—it ensures that the land does not fall
outside the family. As Yael Ziegler explains, only by combining marriage to Ruth with
property redemption can Boaz ensure continuity.

The Moabite Question: Law, Tradition, and Innovation

A related halakhic challenge arises from Ruth’s identity as a Moabite—one that reverberates all the way to King David. Deuteronomy 23:4–7 prohibits Ammonites and
Moabites from entering kehal Hashem, God’s congregation, because of their refusal to
offer hospitality and their hiring of Balaam.

How then can Boaz marry Ruth—and how can David, her descendant, become Israel’s king?

The Talmud (Yevamot 76b–77a) records that Doeg the Edomite challenged David’s legitimacy. The sages defended him by citing a halakhah received from Samuel:
Moavi velo Moaviyah—the prohibition applies only to Moabite men, not women. Boaz,
according to Ketubot 7b and the Yerushalmi (Yevamot 8:3), assembled a court to publicize this ruling before marrying Ruth.

Was Boaz’s ruling a revelation, a publicization, or a new ruling? Some suggest this ruling was newly innovated (Ketuvot 7b, J.T. Yevamot 8:3). Ruth Rabbah 7:7 portrays Peloni Almoni (the anonymous kinsman in chapter 4) as wrongly refraining
from marrying Ruth due to a mistaken stringency, unaware of the true halakhah. Others,
including the Talmud, treat the law as longstanding tradition, hidden from public view
until Boaz made it known.

Rabbi Yaakov Medan observes that God does not want a total break with Moab. God does not command total vengeance against Moabites as he does with Midian, and the
Torah instructs Israel not to attack Ammon and Moab (Deuteronomy 2). Lot, their ancestor, still carries a spark of Abraham's hesed. Ruth embodies that spark—redeeming
Moab through her exceptional kindness. She brings that aspect of Abraham back into the
Israelite fold.

Property Redemption: Ge'ulah in Practice

Leviticus 25:25–28 outlines the laws of ge'ulat karka—redeeming land sold by a destitute relative. The biblical concept of ge'ulah here merges two categories: property
law and familial duty—an intersection typical of biblical halakhah. This legal structure
shapes the Ruth narrative. Boaz agrees to redeem Elimelech's field, and Peloni Almoni
declines when he learns that marriage to Ruth is part of the deal. His concern, according
to Rashi and Ibn Ezra, may have stemmed from Ruth's Moabite identity, from the financial burden, or from the complications of polygamy.

Ultimately, Ruth's story blends ge'ulah and yibbum. Only by performing both does Boaz fulfill the community's vision of family loyalty. The public blessing at the gate
(Ruth 4:12) explicitly links Boaz to Judah and Tamar—acknowledging the precedent of
unconventional, but redemptive, lineage.

Halakhah as Hesed: Generosity in the Field

Beyond questions of marriage and inheritance, the book of Ruth is shaped by the Torah's commandments of agricultural generosity. Ruth gleans from Boaz's field, benefiting from leket, the commandment to leave behind sheaves for the poor.

Though
leket applies only to small, accidental drops, Boaz exceeds the letter of the law—telling
his workers to drop stalks intentionally for Ruth.

The Tosefta (Pe’ah 3:8) tells of a pious man who brought a sacrifice of thanksgiving after accidentally fulfilling leket. The Sefer HaHinukh sees in these laws an
educational aim: to cultivate generosity. Hirsch notes that the laws of pe’ah (leaving a
corner of one’s field unharvested so the poor may take it) and leket remind us that our
property is ultimately God’s.

This ethos pervades the Book of Ruth. It is a story built on kindness that transcends duty, yet is animated by halakhic frameworks—yibbum, ge’ulah, and leket—all transformed by hesed.

Conclusion

Though the Book of Ruth is not a law code, it engages with halakhah deeply and meaningfully. It reflects a living halakhic tradition in which law is not only a command,
but a covenant—shaped by decency, mutual responsibility, and sacred memory. Through questions of yibbum and ge’ulah, the Moabite identity, and agricultural generosity, the Book of Ruth presents halakhah not as a closed system, but as a covenantal framework that grows in dialogue with lived values. Law is refined and fulfilled through human initiative rooted in covenantal kindness.