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**Why Was Elimelekh Punished?**

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The Book of Ruth opens with a brief account of the life of Elimelekh, who is overtaken by catastrophe and tragedy: he dies, both his married sons die childless, and there remain three widows who are unable to continue the family line. We consider this devastating punishment — a clear instance of *kareit*[[1]](#footnote-1)— and wonder what terrible sin could have made Elimelekh deserving of it.

The only hint we have in the text is the fact that Elimelekh leaves Eretz Yisrael at a time of famine. While there is no explicit elaboration as to why this is viewed in such a negative light, the historical context of the narrative offers an answer.

**Leaving Eretz Yisrael: In the Footsteps of Lot**

At the end of the narrative we discover that the story of Ruth’s devotion to Naomi is the story of the bond created between the tribe of Yehuda (and, more broadly, the Jewish people) and Moav. Interestingly, the story of Lot, the father of Moav, parallels the story of Elimelekh. During a famine, when there is insufficient pasture to support the flocks of both Lot and Avraham, Lot chooses to leave Eretz Yisrael and to settle in Sedom, which would appear to be located to the east of the Jordan River[[2]](#footnote-2):

And there was strife between the herdsmen of Avram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle, and the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt then in the land.

And Avram said to Lot: I pray you, let there not be strife between me and you, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself, I pray you, from me; if you will go the left, I will go to the right; if you will go to the right — I will go to the left…

And Lot chose for himself all the Plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed east, and they separated from each other. Avram dwelled in the land of Kena’an, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sedom. But the people of Sedom were evil and exceedingly wicked before God. (Bereishit 13:7-13)

Abandoning his future with the “nation of the God of Avraham,” Lot makes his home amongst a foreign nation. He turns his back on the path of God — the path of “righteousness and justice,” preferring instead the path of the people of Sedom, who are the very opposite of all that Avraham represents.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Elimelekh and Yehuda**

Many generations later, Elimelekh follows in Lot’s footsteps, leaving Beit Lechem in Yehuda to settle in Moav. This is not to be a short stay: at the end of the story of Ruth, Boaz tells the kinsman, “The plot of land that belonged to our brother, Elimelekh, was sold by Naomi, who has returned from the country of Moav” (*Ruth* 4:3) — suggesting that Elimelekh and Naomi sold their land before leaving Eretz Yisrael. Their intention, it seems, had been to settle permanently in Moav.

Like Lot’s departure, Elimelekh’s move to Moav makes a religious and national statement. *Chazal* teach that “Anyone who lives outside of the Land [of Israel] is like someone who has no God” (*Ketubot* 110b). Elimelekh’s sons marry foreign wives, he himself becomes immersed in the foreign culture, and he ends up effectively leaving the God of Avraham and adopting the mores of Moav. It is for this reason that he is punished with *kareit*.

Lot, who turns his back on Avraham and Eretz Yisrael, is likewise punished with *kareit*. His wife dies, his married daughters and their husbands are swept up in the destruction of Sedom, and Lot is left with his younger daughters, who have no one to marry — a situation that spells doom for the family. Elimelekh’s fate mirrors that of Lot: he himself dies, his sons die, and his widow, who is beyond childbearing age, is left with her two daughters-in-law, who have no one to marry.

We have already noted that the Book of *Ruth* brings together the house of Yehuda (symbolized by Elimelekh and Boaz) and the family of Lot (symbolized by Ruth). We also find that the story of Yehuda himself contains some surprising similarities to that of Lot and of Elimelekh. After the sale of Yosef, Yehuda goes down from the mountain range inhabited by his father’s household to the Canaanite plain, and takes as a wife the daughter of a Canaanite man (*Bereishit* 38:1-2). Sure enough, his punishment takes the same form as that of Lot and of Elimelekh: his wife dies, his two sons die childless, and his unwillingness for his third son to marry his widowed daughter-in-law (*yibbum*) almost condemns his family to extinction.

**Betrayal of the Jewish People**

If we take a closer look at the story, we see that Elimelekh’s sin consists of more than just abandoning the Land of Israel, and more than even cutting himself off from the People of Israel.

The text offers little background regarding the period in which the story of Ruth takes place, other than noting that it was “in the days when the judges judged…” (*Ruth* 1:1).

*Chazal* identify the time period of the end of the narrative as the time when Israel was governed by the Judge Ivtzan, at the end of the period of the judges (*Bava Batra* 91a). Working our way backwards in time, this would place Elimelekh’s departure for Moav a decade prior to Ruth’s encounter with Boaz — in other words, the period of subjugation to Ammon and Moav that precedes the six-year rule of Yiftach, Ivtzan’s predecessor. In a different midrash, *Chazal* place the story of Ruth during the time of Ehud ben Gera and Eglon, at the beginning of the period of the judges (*Sanhedrin* 105b*; Ruth Rabba* 1,1).

Either way, the narrative takes place against the backdrop of subjugation of the Jewish people by either Ammon or Moav, Lot’s two sons by his daughters. Thus, Elimelekh and his family leave Eretz Yisrael to settle not only in a foreign land, but in fact in enemy territory — the land of Israel’s Moabite (or Ammonite) oppressors.

Like Lot, who is content to make his home among the evil, wicked people of Sedom, Elimelekh and his family set up home in enemy territory, among Israel’s oppressors. They abandon their extended family and their people, pledging allegiance instead to King Eglon of Moav, or to the king of the Ammonites. This is nothing short of treason.

**The Reaction in Beit Lechem**

The reality of their betrayal as revealed by the background to the story explains the gravity of the punishment meted out to Elimelekh and his family. If we take into account the Midrashic setting, the fact that the memories of oppression by the descendants of Lot are still fresh for the people of Beit Lechem, we can understand the behavior of the kinsman who is dismissive of the Moabite “enemy” girl and refuses to marry her in order to raise up the name of his dead relative.

“If you will redeem [the field], do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.”

“I will redeem it,” he said.

Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.”

At this, the redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might destroy my own heritage. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.” (4:4-6)

It also explains the behavior of the people of Beit Lechem, who initially give Naomi, returning from the plains of Moav, a rather cool reception.

So the two women went on until they came to Beit Lechem. When they arrived in Beit Lechem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?” (1:19)

Moreover, the wary attitude of Boaz’s servants towards the Moabite girl who arrives in the field also begins to make sense: this girl belongs to an enemy people, and she has come to Eretz Yisrael together with the wife of a man who betrayed his people and his homeland, and joined himself to their oppressors (2:6): “The overseer replied, ‘She is the Moabitess who came back from the fields of Moav with Naomi.’”

At the same time, this illumination of Elimelekh’s sin sheds new light on the noble decision of Boaz, who is willing to help Ruth despite her Moabite origins. We also feel admiration for the people of Beit Lechem, the men at the gate and the women neighbors, who in the end give their approval to the marriage between Boaz and Ruth, and bless them (4:11-17).

Finally, we have new appreciation for the power of the ruling of *Chazal* concerning the verse “An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not come into the congregation of the Lord” (*Devarim* 23:4):

“An Ammonite,” but not an Ammonitess; “a Moabite,” but not a Moabitess—these are the words of Rabbi Yehuda. (*Yevamot* 77a).

Ruth defies the example of her ancestor Lot, her father-in-law Elimelekh and even Yehuda himself by cleaving to God, His Land and His People. This allows for the possibility of the descendants of Lot to rectify their wicked ways and join the People of Israel.

1. Rashi, commenting on *Bereishit* 17:14, defines this state as “devoid of progeny and dying before one’s time.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The location of Sedom is not certain, but the city of Tzoar, which is one of the neighboring cities where Lot takes temporary refuge after the overturning of Sedom, is mentioned by Yirmeyahu in his prophecy about Moav (48:34). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Lot leaves Avraham and moves to the land of Moav, on the eastern side of the Jordan. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Admittedly, Avraham also leaves the land of Kena’an and goes down to Egypt during the famine. However, he does so only for a short time, and with the intention of returning. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)