

## HOLIDAYS

# Love in the Time of Omer

BY ILANA KURSHAN

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Anyone who reads novels or sees films is familiar with the tension between romantic love and “real” love, passion and practicality. This tension is played out over the course of the Omer, the period between Passover and Shavuot.

On Passover we chanted the Song of Songs, *Shir Hashirim*, a celebration of young love in all its energy and innocence. Seven weeks later, on Shavuot (June 8), we read Megillat Ruth, a more sobering tale about women who rebuild a family devastated by loss. In the period of the counting of the Omer, then, with the winter long past, we experience the shift from young love to mature love and from freedom to redemption.

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celebrates the freedom to love and be loved without any concerns or responsibilities. These are not lovers who need to support themselves or find a roof to put over their heads—they can sustain themselves with raisin cakes and fall asleep in the fields to the song of the turtledoves. As if in defiance of time itself, the entire book of the Song of Songs—eight chapters in total—has no narrative progression and no plot development. The young man and woman appear frozen in time, and in this they are reminiscent, to me, of the lovers depicted in John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

*Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave*

*Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;*

*Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss;*



On Shavuot, Jews read the Book of Ruth, a pragmatic tale of love. Here, Ruth meets Boaz, her future husband, while gleaning in his fields.

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of the counting of the Omer, then, with the winter long past, we experience the shift from young love to mature love and from freedom to redemption.

The Song of Songs is appropriate for Passover and not just because it celebrates the blossoming of spring. Passover, which commemorates the exodus from Egypt, is also known as “the time of our freedom,” for we celebrate that we are no longer subject to the whims of a despotic Pharaoh. Shir Hashirim, too, is a feast of freedom: in its description of carefree, unbounded lovers leaping over the hills and peering through lattices, the book

“Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

*Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave*

*Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss;  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;*

*She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss*

*Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

In this poem, Keats describes an ancient Greek vase whose surface depicts one lover running after another. Since

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they exist in the static immobility of sculpture, they will never catch up to each other and embrace. They are, as Keats says, “Forever warm and still to be enjoyed / Forever panting and forever young.” The figures painted on the urn are passionate about one another, but their relationship does not develop over time, much like the lovers in the Song of Songs. In the last verse of the Song of

Songs, the lovers still have not found each other; they, too, are still running: “Let me hear your voice. Hurry my beloved, swift as a gazelle or a young stag, to the hill of spices.” But the hill of spices remains elusive, like the unknown destination of the painted figures. Both pairs of lovers are free to frolic, but for both, the longed-for consummation never comes.

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# ARTS & CULTURE

## Kurshan

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The freedom we celebrate on Passover gives way to the legal strictures of Shavuot, when we are bound—albeit also blessed—by the responsibility of observing the mitzvot of the Torah. We are no longer just a liberated people; we are a people consecrated unto God in a divine covenant.

The contrast between the two holidays is evidenced also in the two scrolls. Megillat Ruth, unlike the Song of Songs, is a story of love but also of economics, politics and history. From the very first verse, we are immediately situated in a particular geographical and chronological context: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab.” Unlike the Song of Songs, the Book of Ruth unfolds sequentially over time, with a clear narrative progression: Elimelech’s family travels to Moab to escape famine; Elimelech dies; Machlon and Chilion get married; Machlon and Chilion die; Naomi sets off on her own. From famine to death to marriage to moving, this book is filled with the stuff of real life.

But is Megillat Ruth a love story? The heroine is Naomi’s daughter-in-law Ruth, who refuses to leave

Naomi and returns with her from Moab to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest. Naomi encourages her daughter-in-law to glean in the fields of her kinsman Boaz, who shows her extraordinary kindness. As per Naomi’s instructions, Ruth, who is still a young widow, bathes and anoints herself and lies at the feet of her kinsman, seeking his favor. Naomi’s hope, presumably, is that Boaz will marry Ruth, thereby enabling Ruth to give birth to children who will carry on the family line.

Perhaps Ruth loves Boaz, but if so, we are never told that this is the case. For Ruth, courting Boaz is a response to the exigencies of the moment; it is something she must do to save herself and her mother-in-law from the dangers of being unattached women in a strange land. Unlike the lovers in the Song of Songs who celebrate at their leisure in the wilds of nature, Ruth and Boaz have their tryst on the threshing floor, the place of hard labor. In this, her story is reminiscent of another Keats poem, “Ode to Autumn,” in which the poet personifies Autumn as a female goddess sitting on the threshing floor, the very place where Ruth lay at the feet of Boaz:

*Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind ...*

*And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours.*

The figure of Autumn winnows and gleans grain, labors familiar from Megillat Ruth. But this imagery, which suggests the hard work of agriculture, is vastly different from that of running among the lilies in the Song of Songs. Ardor has given way to practicality: the breath like the fragrance of apples which we find in the Song of Songs has been replaced with the oozings of the cider press, and the lover has become the gleaner.

Ruth, who has tasted the bitter fruits of loss and hunger, knows that there is no Song of Songs for her to sing, neither when she stands in tears amidst the alien corn, nor even when she marries Boaz. Boaz does not profess his devotion to his bride; instead he announces publicly and matter-of-factly: “I am acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Machlon, as my wife, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate.” The text is surprisingly sparing in its description of Ruth’s hard-won success: “So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her.” Does Boaz rejoice in his widowed wife? Does he sing to her that her kisses are sweeter than wine? Perhaps it is this search for music amidst more pragmatic concerns that troubles Keats as well:

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too ...  
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;*

STRENGTH  
IN NUMBERS

But is Megillat Ruth a love story? The heroine is Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth, who refuses to leave

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind ...

# STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

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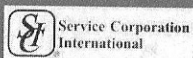
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his wife, and he asks himself  
in his widowed wife? Does he sing to her that her kisses  
are sweeter than wine? Perhaps it is this search for music  
amidst more pragmatic concerns that troubles Keats as  
well:

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too ...  
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.*

Megillat Ruth may not pulse with the passionate poetic intensity of the Song of Songs, nor may it be dismissed as a prosaic historical account. Its beauty is calm and pastoral, at times almost idyllic. The theme of Megillat Ruth is not love, but loving-kindness—as shown by Ruth to Naomi and by Boaz to Ruth. The paired turtledoves give way to the gathering swallows and the wings under which, as Boaz tells her, Ruth will finally find refuge.

It is these gathering swallows, though, and not the voice of the turtledove, that serve as harbinger of the Messiah. While the lovers in the Song of Songs are still prancing amidst the gardens and valleys, Ruth gives birth to the ancestor of David. Redemption comes not from the freedom we celebrate on Passover, but from a life of accepting Torah and mitzvot, as we commemorate on Shavuot. And perhaps the love into which we inevitably grow is not that of the fleeing lovers on the urn, but of the gleaners who winnow on the granary floor. **WJD**

*Ilana Kurshan is a writer and teacher living in Jerusalem.*

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