

No Shoes, No Service? Explaining a Strange Custom in Ruth

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Dedicated by Nathan Kirsh in memory of his beloved brother Jerry, בן-ציון בן יהודה פסח הכהן ז"ל,

Background

1. Ruth 4:6-9 (JPS 1985 translation)

וַיֹּאמֶר הַגָּאֵל לֹא אוֹכַל לְגֹאֹל-[לְגָאֵל-] לִי פֶן-אַשְׁחִית אֶת-נַחְלָתִי גְאֻלָּהּ אֶתָּה אֶת-גְּאֻלָּתִי כִּי לֹא-אוֹכַל לְגָאֵל:

The redeemer replied, “Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate. You take over my right of redemption, for I am unable to exercise it.”

וְזֹאת לְפָנִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל עַל-הַגְּאֻלָּה וְעַל-הַתְּמֻרָה לְקַנֵּם פְּלִדְבָר שְׁלֵף אִישׁ נָעָלוֹ וְנָתַן לְרַעְהוּ וְזֹאת הַתְּעוּדָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

Now this was formerly done in Israel in cases of redemption or exchange: to validate any transaction, one man would take off his sandal and hand it to the other. Such was the practice in Israel.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַגָּאֵל לְבָעֵז קִנְהֵ-לְךָ וַיִּשְׁלַף נַעְלוֹ:

So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Acquire for yourself,” he drew off his sandal.

וַיֹּאמֶר בָּעֵז לְזִקְנֵים וְכָל-הָעָם עֲדִים אַתֶּם הַיּוֹם...

And Boaz said to the elders and to the rest of the people, “You are witnesses today...”

2. Bava Metzia 47a (modified Davidson Edition translation)

כתנאי (רות ד, ז) וזאת לפנים בישראל על הגאולה ועל התמורה לקיים כל דבר שלף איש נעלו ונתן לרעהו גאולה זו מכירה וכן הוא אומר (ויקרא כז, כ) לא יגאל תמורה זו חליפין וכן הוא אומר (ויקרא כז, י) לא יחליפנו ולא ימיר אותו

This dispute between Rav and Levi is parallel to a dispute between tanna'im. The verse states: “Now this was the custom in former time in Israel concerning redemption and concerning substitution, to confirm all matters; a man drew off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor” (Ruth 4:7). The verse is interpreted: “Redemption”; that is a sale. And likewise it says: “Neither shall be sold nor shall be redeemed” (Leviticus 27:28). “Substitution”; that is the transaction of exchange. And likewise it says: “He may neither exchange it nor substitute it” (Leviticus 27:10).

לקיים כל דבר שלף איש נעלו ונתן לרעהו מי נתן למי בועז נתן לגואל רבי יהודה אומר גואל נתן לבועז

“To confirm all matters; a man drew off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor?” Who gave the shoe to whom? Boaz gave his shoe to the redeemer, the closest relative of Elimelech, who had the right of first refusal to the land that Naomi, Elimelech’s widow, was planning to sell. The redeemer was transferring that right to the land to Boaz, who was acquiring it by means of his shoe. Rabbi Yehuda says: The redeemer gave his shoe to Boaz.

An “exchange” for land

3. Bava Metzia 47a (Davidson Edition translation)

רב אמר בכליו של קונה דניחא ליה לקונה דלהוי מקנה קונה כי היכי דלגמר ולקני ליה

Rav says: One effects the transaction with the vessels of the one acquiring the item, who effects the transaction by giving the vessels to the owner of the item. The moment that the owner pulls the vessel into his possession, the transaction is complete and ownership of the item in question is transferred to his counterpart. Rav explains that the one acquiring the item is amenable to having the one transferring ownership of the item acquire his vessel, so that he will resolve to transfer ownership to him.

4. Ibn Ezra to Ruth 4:8

וישלף – בועז שלף נעלו ונתן לגואל. והנה זה כאשר אמרו רז"ל: חליפין. והטעם: שקבלת זה הנעל, ונתת תחתיו גאולתך. והטעם הנעל – בעבור שהוא נמצא תמיד, ולא יתכן להסיר חלוק או מכנסים, שלא ישאר ערום.

And he drew off – Boaz drew off his shoe and gave it to the redeemer. This is as the Sages said: “exchange”. The reason is: [since] you accepted my shoe, you have given me in its place the redemption [rights]. The reason for [using] a shoe is that it is always accessible, and it would not be [proper] to remove a shirt or pants, so that he not remain naked.

5. Anonymous French Commentary (Pseudo-Rashi) to Ruth 4:8

וישלוף נעלו – “ואטלע בועז ית נרתק יד ימיניה וקני מיניה”. ונראין דברי התרגום, שאם נעל של רגל, היה לו לכתוב לשון חליצה, כדכתיב “וחלצה נעלו מעל רגליו” (דברים כ"ה:ט).

“Boaz drew off the [glove] of his right hand, and acquired it from him”. The words of the Targum are fitting, as if it was the shoe of a foot, it should have used language of “Ch-L-Tz”, as it is written “and she drew off [chaltzah] his shoe from his foot”.

A “symbol” of what is being transferred/released

6. Ibn Ezra to Ruth 4:8

ויש אומרים: כי הגואל שלף נעלו ונתנו לבעוז. והטעם: כאשר נתתי לך זה הנעל, כן הגאולה.

And some say that the redeemer drew off his shoe and gave it to Boaz. The reason is: just as I gave you this shoe, so [did I give you] the redemption [rights].

7. Hoil Moshe to Ruth 4:8

וסברת שד"ל היא שהגואל נתן נעלו לבעוז, אם כן הגואל הוא כאן כאבי המשפחה ומעביר רשותו לאדם אחר, ובערבון ניתן לקונה נעלו שהוא אחד מכליו עד יום שהקונה ירד ויאחז בנחלה אשר קנה.

The reasoning of Shadal is that the redeemer gave his shoe to Boaz. If so, the redeemer is like the patriarch of the family, and is transferring his property to another, and as a collateral, his shoe, one of his possessions, is given to the purchaser until the day that the purchaser will descend and take hold of the property which he purchased.

8. Yael Zeigler, The Shoe and the Narrator’s Note, Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy

What is the purpose of the shoe? Does it have a symbolic meaning? In what other circumstances do shoes appear in Tanakh? The shoe frequently arises in a context involving possession of land. Walking on one’s land implies ownership, and the shoe surely acts as a representation of the act of treading on one’s land. In this scenario, it seems likely that it is the redeemer’s shoe that is removed as a symbol of his relinquishment of his right to take possession of Elimelekh’s land.

Some scholars have suggested that the shoe may also symbolize the right to acquire a woman.

(Footnote 15: This is, of course, related to the role of the shoe in the ceremony of *halitza*, in which a man relinquishes his obligation/right to marry his deceased brother’s wife. Calum M. Carmichael, “A Ceremonial Crux: Removing a Man’s Sandal as a Female Gesture of Contempt,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 323, cites T. M. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1969), 449–50, who notes that in Arabic, a wife is sometimes figuratively referred to as a shoe. Aside from the passage with regard to *halitza*, there is no evidence of this meaning in Tanakh. Deriving the idea that the shoe symbolizes a woman from these two biblical passages (Deut. 25:9–10 and Ruth 4:9) would result in a circular argument, because Ruth is clearly referencing the passage in Deuteronomy in so many ways. This theory is therefore, in my opinion, unconvincing.)

Something else?

9. Ralbag to Ruth 4:7

וידמה שכבר השיב לו נעלו אחר זה כי לא יתכן שישאר שופט יחף ברגלו...

It seems that he had already given back his shoe afterwards, as it cannot be that a judge would remain barefoot...

10. Hoil Moshe to Ruth 4:7

שלף וגו' – כאומר: אם לא כדברי כן אעשה, לא תשיב לי נעלי, ואהיה חשוב חלוץ הנעל, כלומר אדם ראוי לבזיון, Mascalzone. Would draw off – as if saying – if my actions do not follow my words, don’t return my shoe, and I will be considered one as with an untied [or removed] shoe, meaning, a person fitting to be embarrassed, a *mascalzone*.

11. Shemot 19:11

והגבַלְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לְאֹמֶר הַשְּׁמָרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּבְנִגְע בְּקַצְיָהּוּ כְּלִי־הַנֶּגַע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת:

You shall set bounds to the people all around, saying, ‘Be careful that you don’t go up onto the mountain, or touch its border. Whoever touches the mountain shall be surely put to death.