

[Ruth](ruth.html) The Agunah

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In this [study](study.html) I would like to look at the primary pasuk, in the Tanakh,[[1]](#footnote-1) that speaks of an agunah is in [Megillat Ruth](ruth.html). The [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word ‘agunah’ means ‘chained’ or ‘anchored’. Lets start our [study](study.html) by examining some definitions:

**Agunah[[2]](#footnote-2)** (**עגונה**‎, plural: *agunot* - עגונות); literally 'anchored or chained') is a [halachic](walking.html) term for a [Jewish](gen-jew.html) woman who is "chained" to her [marriage](mashal.html). It is also often used nowadays for a woman whose husband refuses, or is unable, to grant her an official bill of divorce, [known](daat.html) as a *get*.

**Yibum, Yavam, Yevamah**: The Torah dictates that if a married man dies childless, the widow is to marry her dead husband's brother, preferably the eldest. The firstborn son they produce together is considered a continuation of the dead husband's line. This practice is [known](daat.html) as *yibum*, or levirate [marriage](mashal.html). The brother-in-[law](law.html) is called the *yavam*; the widow is called the *yevamah*.

**Halitzah[[3]](#footnote-3)**: The ceremony of the taking off of a brother-in-[law](law.html)'s shoe by the widow of a brother who has died childless, through which ceremony he is released from the obligation of marrying her, and she becomes free to marry whomever she [desires](needs.html).[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are [four](four.html) principal categories[[5]](#footnote-5) of the agunah:

1. A husband who divorces his wife in the civil courts and possibly even remarries, but refuses to give his wife a get, either because of malice or greed.

2. A husband who disappears without leaving a trace, so that he is not available to issue the divorce that [halacha](walking.html) demands.

3. The husband who is lost in military action or dies in a mass explosion.

4. Not strictly a case of "desertion" but similar to it is the rarer case of a childless widow who, according to halachah, requires *halitzah* (release) from her husband's brother before she can remarry. [Torah [law](law.html) requires her brother-in-[law](law.html) to marry her to perpetuate the dead husband's "[name](name.html)" by providing his wife with a child. The ceremony of halitzah releases the widow from this obligation.]

In Megillat [Ruth](ruth.html), an agunah, halitzah, a yavam, and a yevamah play a central role. The halitzah ceremony accomplishes a major correction: The Agunah is unchained.

It is well [known](daat.html) that [Ruth](ruth.html) accomplished the task of halitzah. It is not so well [known](daat.html) that [Ruth](ruth.html) was an agunah who needed halitzah before she could undergo yibum through [sexual intercourse](marriageact.html) with Boaz.

For halitzah to unchain an agunah, there must be an agunah. Where is the agunah in Megillat [Ruth](ruth.html)? The answer to this question is found in the following pasuk:

[***Ruth***](ruth.html) ***1:13*** *Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them* (te'agenah - תעגנה)  *from having husbands?*

The English words ‘stay for them’, in the above pasuk, comes from the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word: תעגנה.

Rashi tells us about this word:

**Tie yourself down - תעגנה** (This is) an expression of being restricted and confined, (from the root עוג) as in (Taanith 23a), “He drew a (confining) circle and stood within it.” And some interpret (עגנה, as stemming from the root עגן), an expression denoting anchoring, but this is not possible, for if so, the נ should have been punctuated with a dagesh (forti to replace the missing נ) or written (with) [two](two.html) נ’s ([one](one.html) as the radical and the other for the feminine plural).

Ibn Ezra, perhaps deliberately, notes that the word is unique by writing that it "has no friend".

Rashi in his commentary on [Ruth](ruth.html) tries to show that actually the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) root here is עוג and that the word **תעגנה** is the feminine plural [future](future.html) form of the verb. His proof for this is that if the *nun* was part of the root, it should have had a *dagesh* or appeared twice. He still says the word means "restriction", but gives the example of Honi HaMe'agel who "עג עוגה ועמד בתוכה" - drew (*ag*) a circle and stood inside it until it rained.

However, Avineri in *Heichal Rashi* points out that according most grammarians the *nun* is part of the root,[[6]](#footnote-6) and even Rashi himself in his commentary on Bava Kama 80a[[7]](#footnote-7) [connects](connection.html) the word *agunah* and the verse in [Ruth](ruth.html).

***Baba Bathra 73a***[*MISHNAH*](orallaw.html)*. HE WHO SELLS A SHIP SELLS [IMPLICITLY] ITS MAST, SAIL, ANCHOR AND ALL THE IMPLEMENTS NEEDED FOR DIRECTING IT, BUT HE DOES NOT SELL THE CREW, NOR THE PACKING-BAGS, NOR THE STORES. IF, HOWEVER, HE SAID TO HIM: ‘IT AND ALL THAT IT CONTAINS’, THEN ALL THESE ARE INCLUDED IN THE SALE.*

[*GEMARA*](orallaw.html)*. TOREN is the mast; for so it is written: They have taken cedars from Lebanon to make masts for thee. NES is the sail; for so it is written: Of fine linen with richly woven work* [*from Egypt*](thebirth.html) *was thy sail, that it might be to thee for an ensign. [As to] OGEN, R. Hiyya* [*taught*](teacher.html)*: These are its anchors* (*ogen*)*; for so it is written: Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? Would ye shut yourselves off for them* (te'agenah - תעגנה) *and have no husbands?*

Thus we see that [Ruth](ruth.html) was an agunah. Now that we have established this, it is important to [know](daat.html) that [Ruth](ruth.html) will remain an agunah until halitzah is performed and Boaz (he is a *yavam*) [marries](marriageact.html) her (*yibum[[8]](#footnote-8)*). Until then, she is chained (*agunah*) and forbidden [marriage](mashal.html) to anyone else. When Boaz [marries](marriageact.html) her she becomes a *yevamah* through the *yibum*.

# Lot and His Daughters

With regard to Lot, we see a hint to agunot (plural of agunah) in Lot’s daughters and we also see yibbum. As agunot, they were chained and denied [marriage](mashal.html) because there were no other men to marry (or so they thought), except their father.

***Bereshit (Genesis) 19:31*** *And there* (aleinu) *is not a man on earth to* [*consort*](marriageact.html) *with us.*

Professor Benno [Jacob](israelja.html) points out a linguistic anomaly in the statement of Lot's daughters: "And there is not a man on earth to [consort](marriageact.html) with us". In [Hebrew](hebrew.html), the word *aleinu* is unusual; usually the word *eleinu* would be used in this context. The only other [time](time.html) that *aleinu* appears in a similar context is in the chapter on yibbum:

***Devarim (Deuteronomy) 25:5*** *Yevamah yavo aleiha - Her husband's brother shall unite with her.*

In other words, this hints that yibbum was at the [heart](body.html) of Lot's daughters' attempts to revive their father's [seed](flower.html) and rebuild the [name](name.html) of the family that perished.

# [Yehuda](fathers.html) and [Tamar](fathers.html)

We [know](daat.html) that [Tamar](fathers.html) was also an agunah until she was able to seduce [Yehuda](fathers.html) ( the yavam) and thus complete the levirate [marriage](mashal.html) (*yibbum*). Now [Yehuda](fathers.html) (yavam) and [Tamar](fathers.html) (yevamah) were the ancestors of Boaz. From this we see that the messianic line seems to bring significant meaning to the agunah.

**Yevamah**

In [Megillat Ruth](ruth.html) we find the word yevamah used to refer directly to Orpah and indirectly to [Ruth](ruth.html) in:

[***Ruth***](ruth.html) ***1:15*** *And her mother-in-*[*law*](law.html) *said to her, Behold, your sister-in-*[*law*](law.html)(yevamah) *has gone back to her people and to her kinsmen; return also after your sister-in-*[*law*](law.html)*.*

The only other place we find yevamah is in the Torah in the context of the [mitzva](cmds613.html) of yibum:

***Devarim (Deuteronomy) 25:7*** *And if the man like not to take his brother’s wife* (yevamah)*, then let his brother’s wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, My husband’s brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a* [*name*](name.html) *in* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html)*, he will not perform the duty of my husband’s brother. 8 Then the elders of his* [*city*](city.html) *shall call him, and* [*speak*](mashal.html) *unto him: and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her; 9 Then shall his brother’s wife (*yevamah*) come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his* [*foot*](heel.html)*, and spit in his* [*face*](body.html)*, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother’s house.*

Since [Ruth](ruth.html) and Orpah are sisters-in-[law](law.html), it stands to reason that if Orpah is a yevamah, then so also is [Ruth](ruth.html) a yevamah. Both were widows of [Jewish](gen-jew.html) men who did not have any offspring. Orpah spurned an attachment with [HaShem](hashem.html) and His Torah. She returned to the [Goyim](gen-jew.html) and became a reprobate.

[***Midrash***](orallaw.html) ***Rabbah -*** [***Ruth***](ruth.html) ***II:20*** *R.* [*Isaac*](isaac.html) *said: The whole of that night when Orpah separated from her mother, a hundred heathens raped her. That is the meaning of the verse, And as he talked with them, behold, there came up the champion... out of the ranks of the Philistines)[[9]](#footnote-9). The ketib is mimma'arwoth, referring to the hundred men who violated her that night. R. Tanchuma said: And* [*one*](one.html) *dog also, as it is written, And the Philistine said unto* [*David*](fathers.html)*: am I a dog.[[10]](#footnote-10)*

[Ruth](ruth.html) clung to Naomi, Her God, and her Torah. She obeyed Naomi and remained an agunah until Ploni Almoni performed Halitzah and Boaz performed yibum. Then [Ruth](ruth.html) became a yevamah and Boaz became a yavam.

# [Remez](remez.html)

In an earlier [study](study.html) we found that [Ruth](ruth.html) is a picture of the Bne [Israel](gen-jew.html) at [Sinai](stages.html) in the days of Moshe. This suggests that Bne [Israel](gen-jew.html), in the [end of days](lastdays.html), is an agunah waiting to be [redeemed](redemption.html) from her current state. She is waiting to become a yevamah. Her yavam, in Megillat [Ruth](ruth.html), is Boaz. In [remez](remez.html) Boaz pictures [Mashiach](mashiach.html). Thus [Mashiach](mashiach.html) (the yavam) will perform yibum with [Israel](gen-jew.html) (the yevamah) and she will become His wife.

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1. Tanakh is a Hebrew acronym formed from the initial Hebrew letters of the Masoretic Text’s three traditional subdivisions: The **T**orah (“Teaching”, also known as the [Five](http://www.betemunah.org/five.html) Books of Moses), **N**eviim (Prophets) and **K**etuvim (Writings)—hence **T**a**N**a**K**h. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wikipedia [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Jewish Encyclopedia [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Devarim 25:5-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to Dr. Robert Gordis [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example the Radak in Sefer HaShorashim. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. s.v. *ha'aguna* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to Torah [law](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CShavuot%5CRuth%5Claw.html), the brother of a deceased childless man is required to marry his brother's widow. The levirate marriage is referred to in Hebrew, as yibum. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. l Sam. XVII, 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I Sam. XVII, 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)