

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



## My name is Nobody!

### Shavuot

There are, I believe, three kinds of anonymity. The best known is the philanthropist who desires to donate without attracting attention or notoriety. We just had a great example of that, when an alumnus of Columbia University gave the largest ever donation to Bar Ilan University (\$260 million!). He wanted the world to know that Columbia wasn't getting the money, but also wanted his anonymity. Of course, I know who it is, but can't reveal.

When I taught at Jewish schools in America this brand of largesse frustrated the fund raisers. They wanted to publicize the donors to encourage others, but money talks. Or in this case buys silence.

This kind of modesty or privacy is cool, and eventually is discovered. The proof of that reality is the amazing story of the Kamtzan of Krakow, Yossele the Holy Miser ([www.nishmas.org/stories/holymiser.htm](http://www.nishmas.org/stories/holymiser.htm)).

Then there is the anonymity of 'Who was that masked man?' Someone who does a significant act, but is never identified. I believe this usually happens because the records just aren't complete. Who fired the 'Shot Heard Round the World' at Lexington Green, April 19, 1775; who

started the Great Chicago Fire in 1871; who was the Tank Man in Tiananmen Square June 5, 1989.

Our Bible abounds in such individuals. Our Sages have made putative identifications (sometimes to make a pedagogic point, sometimes to eliminate blank spots), but we really don't know who the PALIT was (B'reishit 14:13), who the agent of Avraham was to find a wife for Yitzchak; who was the wood gatherer (Bamidbar 15:32), the blasphemer (Vayikra 24:10); the fighting Jews seen by Moshe (Sh'mot 2:12), who did Ya'akov fight with (B'reishit 32:25), who told Yosef where his brothers were outside Dotan (B'reishit 37:15). This list is very long, and includes many, many women (Sisera's mother, the woman of Tekoa, witch of Endor, Pharaoh's daughter, Shimon's mother). These lacunae appear in some of our best known stories.

So, I'd sort of like to call this attempt to describe the 3 categories of anonymity as The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, but instead the reality is closer to the title of another Spaghetti Western called My Name is Nobody (with one of my all-time favorites, Henry Fonda), which translates into Hebrew as SH'MI P'LONI ALMONI!

This third category is the one I really want to discuss, and that is Ploni Almoni, in our story of Rut. This paradigm should be infamous. They consciously decided to allow the parade of history to march on by, without them.

The play 1776 had such a character. We do actually know his name, James Wilson, but he only voted for independence from Britain, because he didn't want to stand out as the one who prevented independence. Concerning him, his erstwhile confederate, John Dickerson, said: Is that how nations are formed? By a non-entity trying to preserve the anonymity he so richly deserves.

Back to our story. Here's the verse: Meanwhile, Boaz had gone to the gate and sat down there. And now the redeemer whom Boaz had mentioned passed by. He called, "Come over and sit down here, So-and-so!" And he came over and sat down (Rut 4:1).

Our protagonist is the only human ever called Ploni Almoni. Twice our Bible uses this term for geographical locations (Sh'muel Alef 21:3; Melachim Bet 6:8). Dr. Yael Ziegler claims that those locations were censored by the military authorities for security purposes. Cool! It makes it feel like we're reading current military dispatches.

So, why does our character (or the editors) seem to demand anonymity? The S'fat Emet explains that this particular issue is the main reason that we read Rut on Shavuot. Our Sages throughout history have a unique intellectual approach to understand secrets within the Torah which are not explicit, and then suddenly apply them when the time is right. So, too, Boaz (BO

OZ; 'within him there is power') stands tall to declare that the Torah She'B'al Peh (Oral Tradition) must be seen as authoritative as the Torah heard at Mt. Sinai from the Mouth of God!

The particular issue at hand is the status of the nation of Ammon. The Torah says that they are not allowed to enter the Jewish community (D'varim 23:3). However, the Oral Tradition limits that prohibition to the males; Ammonite, not Ammonitess. Ploni doesn't have confidence in that Oral Tradition, and feels that he is being MACHMIR and safe, by passing on this opportunity to preserve the name of his relative.

Others say simply that he was afraid, 'lest I destroy my legacy' (verse 6). After all, the two sons of Elimelech, Machlon and Chilyon, died after marrying these two Ammonitish women. It could appear to be a dangerous undertaking.

But there's a bigger issue at play. We Jews try very hard to preserve people's names and legacy. The entire system of YIBUM (Levirate Marriage) is based on this concept of keeping alive the name of one who has passed without heir. There is also the issue of land belonging to the family and tribe, but let's stay focused on the name.

This idea is perhaps, in some way, connected to a fascinating idea: People continue to remain with us as long as their name is spoken. Ernest Hemmingway said: Everyman has two deaths,

when he is buried in the ground, and the last time someone says his name.

This idea has a certain charm, and so our Ploni has extinguished this opportunity for his kinsman. However, I feel strongly that the point is closer to a punishment than just missing a putative opportunity.

Our Jewish heritage survives because brave people take a stand to defend our people and guard our tradition. Those people deserve our respect and recognition. Say those names!

But what of someone who shirks that responsibility because it's inconvenient or uncomfortable? YIMACH SH'MO, 'erase that name!' I don't like to use that phrase for Jews, because it is so painful, but, maybe, that is the point here. And we don't have to do it or say the hurtful phrase. It's just what happens.

There was a job to do. Boaz stood up and accepted the challenge, and contributed his DNA to the line which will produce the MOSHIACH! B'MIHEIRA B'YAMEINU, Please!

PLONI is ALMONI, because he passed. When there's a job to do, a mitzva to fulfill, Jews in need, be BO AZ; the one with power inside! Chag Samei'ach! 🤞