RETHINKING
Shavuot
WOMEN, RELATIONSHIPS
& JEWISH TEXTS
Dear Friend,

JWI is delighted to release the second in our series of four guides, *Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts*, designed to spark new conversations about iconic relationships by taking a fresh look at old texts. The focus of this guide, *Rethinking Shavuot* lends itself to lively discussion in and around the holiday. Using the text of the *megillah, midrash*, and modern commentary, the guide is designed to encourage conversations about relationships. Each section of the guide discusses a different quality common to people seeking healthy relationships: *the importance of living in community, *the power of small acts of kindness in building trust, and *the necessity of imagining a different future.*

A number of people were instrumental in developing *Rethinking Shavuot* and we want to particularly acknowledge and thank Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum for her tireless efforts and contributions to this guide. We are also grateful to Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, Rabbi Raffi Bilek, Rabbi Marla Hornsten, rabbinical student Ari Lorge, and Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray for their thoughtful participation in the project.

These guides are a project of JWI’s Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community, a group of clergy committed to promoting Jewish responses that end violence against women. Please visit [www.jwi.org/clergy](http://www.jwi.org/clergy) to learn more about the important work of the Task Force.

We are thrilled at the level of interest in our guide expressed by the Jewish community. Our work is stronger through our partnerships and collaborations and we thank the many organizations helping to disseminate this guide to their networks. We anticipate that the guides will be used by diverse people in a variety of settings - whether in a synagogue, college or at home, in a preexisting study group, hevruta [study-pair] or book club, or just by friends getting together for coffee or a meal.

We hope that you are as eager to read and use this guide as we are to share it with you. We look forward to hearing your feedback.

Wishing you a joyful Shavuot,

Lori Weinstein, Executive Director

Deborah Rosenbloom, Director of Programs

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*Jewish Women International is the leading Jewish organization working to end violence against women and girls domestically and internationally. JWI’s multifaceted advocacy focuses on the Violence Against Woman Act and the International Violence Against Women Act while JWI’s healthy relationship and financial literacy programs help girls realize the full potential of their personal strength. JWI’s convenes the Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community and the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition, which advocates at the national level for anti-violence legislation. For more information, please visit [www.jwi.org](http://www.jwi.org) or contact us at 800.343.2823.*
Shalom,

On behalf of the Clergy Task Force of JWI, we are thrilled to present our second study guide in a series, *Rethinking Shavuot: Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts.*

This guide presents both traditional and contemporary readings of the Book of Ruth within the context of building healthy and meaningful relationships. We hope to present a new perspective on the text, opening our eyes to the potential within the Book of Ruth, by looking at the themes of community, kindness/trust, and future vision with a new lens.

We hope the guide will be well received and used throughout the greater Jewish community in a variety of settings, but particularly for a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* study. We are grateful to our many organizational partners of all movements for their assistance and support in distributing this resource in preparation for the observance of Shavuot.

We’d also like to take this opportunity to thank Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum who has taken the lead in creating and developing our series of guides, as well express gratitude to those who have contributed to the writing of this particular guide including Rabbi Raffi Bilek, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, rabbinical student, Ari Lorge, Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray, and Deborah Rosenbloom.

As with all our projects, this could not have been completed without the support of JWI, and in particular Deborah Rosenbloom, JWI’s Director of Programs, who supports and encourages all of our endeavors.

We welcome your reactions to this resource, and hope you will use it this Shavuot and in years to come.

With best wishes for a meaningful holiday,

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Co-Chair, Clergy Task Force

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Introduction

In our first guide, which focused on the holiday of Purim, we collected texts and commentaries that we felt could help us imagine actual, lived lives for Vashti, Esther, and Achashverosh to see what they could teach us about healthy and unhealthy relationships. For our second guide, we wondered if we could do something similar with the main characters in the Book of Ruth – Naomi, Orpah, Ruth, and Boaz – whose intersecting stories are given voice each year on Shavuot.

In reading the story with this new lens, we realized the centrality of three ways to journey toward safety and well-being. Our reading of megillat Ruth and some of its supporting texts revealed to us *the importance of living in community, *the power of small acts of kindness in building trust, and *the necessity of imagining a different future.

I hope the following pages will spark conversations in social halls, sanctuaries, Hillel dining rooms, coffee shops and wherever else Jews talk about things that matter deeply. But I especially hope this particular guide will provide a tikkun, an enhancement – in this case, of the story of Ruth itself – for groups who gather on the eve of Shavuot. Since medieval times tikkun leil Shavuot – literally, a repair or making-better on the evening of Shavuot and as such a kind of enrichment – has been a time for all-night study in many Jewish communities in preparation for receiving the Torah.

What does it mean to "receive" Torah? Please read on. We have attempted to offer several examples of the characters in the story of Ruth doing just that and gaining safety and wellbeing in the process. And in addition to excerpts from some of our foundational texts (the Book of Ruth itself and midrashim on megillat Ruth) we've also included a Jewish folktale that we think sums up what it is exactly that Ruth receives by joining the Jewish people and what the Jewish people receive when the Ruths of the world join us.

I wish you a hag Shavuot sameakh – a happy and meaningful Shavuot, full of helpful study and conversation.

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum
Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Is this guide for women only?
A: No, not at all. Actually, we intentionally invited male voices into the guide hoping to open up a dialogue between both men and women by creating a gender friendly environment.

Q: Study and conversations sound interesting, but is there a follow up?
A: In Jewish tradition, we know that study and action complement one another; save some time for browsing the Suggestions for Action at the end of the guide.

Q: How can my study group use this guide?
A: There are a number of ways to use the guide. We suggest starting by briefly sharing why you think this topic is an important one for the group to discuss. Some study groups find it meaningful to ask participants to either say aloud or think of the name of someone in whose honor or memory they want to devote this study. Then ask participants to read the text(s) (either in English, Hebrew or both) and the commentary that follows, aloud. Use the accompanying questions and prompts to begin the conversations.

If you can’t cover all the material in one study group session, then consider using the guide at a second session. Alternatively, you might want to browse through the entire guide and select one section for your study and focus, including the suggestions for action. Your group may be inspired to take action beyond the time allocated for the study group, and hopefully the guide will spark conversations that continue after the formal time allocated for the study group.
Q: I’m a congregational rabbi and I would like to share this guide with my congregants. Do you have any ideas for ways to do that?

A: You may want to begin a congregational conversation by choosing one of the themes and texts for a d’var torah or as part of a tikkun leil Shavuot. Even if the formal study sessions for Shavuot are using different material, this guide can be made available to congregants for their own use – print out several copies and let congregants take them home to read. You may also want to make the guide available to the entire synagogue through your listserv and encourage groups such as the sisterhood to hold a study group session to discuss the entire guide. We hope you’ll find many creative ways to use this guide to deepen the experience of Shavuot!

Q: I don’t belong to any study groups but I’m intrigued by this material. How can I use it?

A: Our goal is to start thought-provoking conversations – whether they start during a formal study group or over a latte. Share the guide with a friend or two and discuss over coffee or while taking a walk. Your discussion may take place over the course of a few minutes or a few weeks.

Q: I’m going to be hosting a meal on Shavuot for friends and family. I’d love to use this material. Any ideas?

A: We think that this study guide goes perfectly with blintzes and cheesecake! To encourage maximum participation around the table, you may want to provide each of your guests with a copy.

Q: Are you planning to write other guides?

A: Yes, Rethinking Shavuot: Women, Relationships & Jewish Texts is the second in our series of four guides that we are planning to produce this year. If you’d like to get on our distribution list, please email Deborah Rosenbloom at drosenbloom@jwi.org.
The Goal: Healthy Relationships

With the publication of each of our guides we intend to highlight different aspects of safe and healthy relationships. For this Shavuot guide we’ve chosen three characteristics uncovered in our reading of the Book of Ruth and some of its supporting texts about Naomi, Orpah, Ruth, and Boaz. We think of them actually as three ways to journey toward safety and well-being. As you read on, you’ll notice that each of these three characteristics has been paired with one or several Jewish texts, with several contemporary commentaries, and with a few conversation starters. They are:

*the importance of living in community in times of distress
*the power of small acts of kindness in building trust
*the necessity of imagining a different future in order to escape a difficult past
Texts, Commentaries and Conversations

The translations of Tanakh [the Hebrew Bible] used throughout are from the Judaica Press edition edited by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg as well as from several editions of the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh. Translations from the body of midrash known as Rut Rabba have been largely taken from those found on the software collection known as Soncino Classics, published by Davka.

Section 1: the importance of living in community

text • Megillat Ruth • chapter 1:1 - 2

Read aloud:
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. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Machlon and Chilion; [they were] Ephrathites of Beth-Lehem in Judah. And they came to the country of Moab, and remained there.

text • Rut Rabba 1:4 • excerpts from a midrash* on Ruth 1:1

*A midrash belongs to an ancient genre of interpretation of a Biblical verse; some midrashim use small stories and parables to make their points. While quite a few midrashim are found throughout the Talmud, many midrashim on the Book of Ruth have been collected in Rut Rabba ['major' Ruth]. Some belong to a collection known as Rut Zuta ['minor' Ruth]. Rut Rabba was compiled more than a thousand years after the time of the story of Ruth is situated.

Read aloud:
Why was Elimelech punished? [with an early death, as stated in verse 3: Elimelech, Naomi's husband died and she was left with her two sons.] Because he struck [despair] into the hearts of Israel.... Elimelech was one the great men of his district and one of the [political] leaders of his generation. But when the famine came, he said, "Now all Israel will come knocking at my door, each one with his basket." He got up and fled from them. This is the meaning of the verse AND A MAN WENT [out] FROM BETH-LEHEM IN JUDAH.
text • Rashi on Megillat Rut 1:1

עטור ג롤ה היה פרנסו חותם מצאריך ישראל להזריח לארץ במעל צאתי
שוחה על ענוי צאתי בענויי, חבואו לפניים ולקרק לפניños

Read aloud:
AND A MAN WENT OUT.... Elimelech was very wealthy and was a leader of his generation. He went out from the Land of Israel to [a place] outside the Land because of stinginess [literally, narrowness of the eye], for he begrudged the poor [his eyes were narrowed, he wore an expression of resentfulness toward the poor] who came to press [their claims on] him; therefore he was punished.

texts • Rut Rabba: P’tichtaot siman 7. Rut Zuta: Parsha alef

והר Rahmen (הלא) מתחרחחר ד לא רבי נתנהמא פורשר והזא - רות (בכר) פריטה א ד ויהי זימנו שמחת
ככל מקום שמאמר "וייחי" צאתו "וייחי ימי שופטי השופטים" מז צאתו דניה שמחת
"וייחי רבע יאואך" "וייחי ילי פטומך, אחרי ליעבון של חורה, ופעם ליעבון קלעמה"

Read aloud:
Wherever the Hebrew word va-yehi occurs [in the biblical text] it designates woe. What woe is implied in the verse "And it came to pass (va-yehi) in the days when the judges judged" (Ruth 1:1)? The verse itself answers: “there was (va-yehi) a famine in the Land.”

Why does the word va-yehi occur twice in the verse? Once to indicate the famine for Torah and again to indicate the famine for bread.

Commentary 1a

Rabbinical student Ari Lorge suggests that the word ‘famine’ is used both literally and figuratively in the Book of Ruth and reflects on the responsibilities of community members to one another.

The texts above, taken from Ruth Rabba and Ruth Zuta [the major collection of midrashim on Ruth and the minor one, respectively], suggest that the famine in Judah consisted in a shortage both of food and of education. Regarding the latter claim, we could say that the leaders of Judah were not properly instructing their community.

We learn from this an important lesson concerning the community’s role in creating healthy relationships. The biblical text and the later commentators teach us that Elimelech was a community leader in Judah whose financial support could have sustained the people during the famine. Despite having this capacity he fled Judah, scorning the needs of the poor. The tradition faults him for
withdrawing his financial support from the community. One may, however, expand this condemnation even further.

By fleeing from his obligations, Elimelech sets a negative example for his community. He teaches them that one may abandon those in need. The power of a leader’s instructive example cannot be overstated. People internalize the behaviors they see around them – these behaviors become normative. This internalization is now known to form our most formative thoughts about relationships (positive and negative). In fact, we know that one of the most effective ways to foster healthy relationships is to model healthy relationships. The implication of this insight is that every member of a community is responsible for being a leader in terms of the example she or he sets.

Although this makes teachers of us all, community leaders like Elimelech and Boaz have even greater power because they have greater visibility. While Elimelech sets a negative example by fleeing, Boaz provides a positive one by advocating for the welfare of the gleaners in his field. So, too, leaders who live healthy relationships become teachers of healthy relationships.

We who are well-fed can still be said to be experiencing a kind of famine; we are hungry for community leaders who model healthy relationships.

Ari Lorge is in his fourth year of rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, and is a member of JWI’s Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community. He is an intern for College and Youth Programming for the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

Conversations

1. In the Book of Ruth 2: 5-12, we learn that Ruth’s actions have become known to the entire community – even Boaz’s servants know her by sight. Which actions of hers have made her well known? What does her example teach the community?

2. Think of leaders who do model integrity and a concern for others in their communities. Who are they? What impact does their behavior have on the community?

3. Please share a time when you have consciously modeled a specific characteristic of a healthy relationship. What was your motivation? How did it make you feel? Did it have the intended effect?

Commentary 1b

Cantor Debbie Katchko-Gray reflects on the power of community in her own life, both as someone who stayed in community while in need of support and someone who later was able to give support to others.

The Book, or Scroll, of Ruth begins with a famine followed by a wealthy man of the community, Elimelech, fleeing with his immediate family. One question we can ask is whether their lives would
have been better if they had stayed in Eretz Yisrael and in their own community during the famine. Can being part of a community give us strength during a crisis?

In my own life I have seen the blessing and power of being part of a community. In 1986 I had a personal crisis that brought an entire community to my doorstep, or so it seemed! I believe my four sons and I thrived because we were never alone. We were always part of a larger Jewish community with many wonderful role models for my children and support for me. In the immediate months of my crisis, food, money, and even an anonymous mortgage donor appeared to help us through very tough times. Other people offered to help as well and I wrote down their names, offers, and phone numbers. Just looking at that long list and seeing how many people cared about us gave me strength, enormous courage, and hope – even if I rarely called anyone.

I believe in the power of community. In subsequent years when I was in a position to help others – volunteering and singing in so many places, counseling others, sharing in life cycle events – this kind of giving came back to bless me many times over.

If you do not yet feel connected to community and you want to change that, I suggest you start by donating time and trying consciously to bring light and joy into someone else’s life. Doing for others often enriches our own lives. Perhaps if Elimelech had stayed in Judah, his life would have been blessed in ways he could not have imagined.

Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray is a fourth generation cantor. She is the second woman to serve a Conservative congregation and founder of the Women Cantors’ Network. She currently serves as the cantor for Temple Shearith Israel of Ridgefield, CT and is a member of JWI’s Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community.

Conversations

1. Elsewhere in the midrash quoted above, we learn that a person should not leave Eretz Yisrael unless [the lack of food is so bad that] two se’ahs of wheat cost a shekel. Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel asks, "When is this?" and then answers, "If it is possible to obtain even one se’ah for a shekel, a Jew should not leave." But the midrash writer counters: “It has been taught that in time of pestilence and in time of war, gather in your feet [i.e., stay put] and in time of famine, spread out your feet [leave].” Leaving Eretz Yisrael in a time of famine is generally sanctioned. For what exactly is Elimelech condemned?

2. Do you feel part of a supportive community? If so, how does it enrich your life? If you are not a member of a community, what steps could you take to become part of one?

3. In Arthur Miller's play, A View from the Bridge, the protagonist Eddie Carbone is eulogized by his friend as a person who is "willing to be wholly known," implying that Eddie was willing to be wholly known by more than his immediate family. If you are feeling isolated and afraid, what might be an incentive for you to reach out to others and strive to become "wholly known" to a community? What would the benefits be for you? What would the benefits be to the community?
Section 2: The power of small acts of kindness in building trust

text • Megillat Ruth • chapter 2: 8 - 14

Read aloud:
Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to me, daughter. Don't go glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them; I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn." She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner? " Boaz said in reply, "I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people you had not known before. May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge." She answered, "You are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant – though I am not so much as one of your maidservants." At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar." So she sat down beside the reapers. He handed her a pinch of roasted grain; she ate her fill and was satisfied, and had some left over.
Commentary 2a

*Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin* offers several contemporary examples of kindnesses that can seem small and insignificant in the scheme of things – or very large and significant when we adjust our sense of scale.

While a few of us in this world do have great power or great wisdom or great talent with which to do great things, most of us live out our lives in the more mundane universe of modest power and small things. And yet even these small things, and even we, can make a great difference. Things that may seem small when viewed from a global scale can loom very large when measured on a personal scale.

When we are sick and weak in bed and a loved one brings us tea to soothe our throat and quench our thirst – that is a small thing that looms large. When we are dashing for the elevator and a stranger holds the doors open for us; when we have a restless, tired child in our shopping cart and someone waves us ahead in front of them in the check-out line ... these are all small things of a moment that nonetheless open vaults of gratitude in us.

It is the act that we appreciate, but more, it is the thought that we cherish. The moment will pass, the deed end, but the memory of the kindness remains. We will always be grateful when someone notices us and our needs, looks beyond themselves and the inconvenience we might be causing them, and determines to do an act of kindness without any certainty of personal benefit.

And if we can pile up a whole host of such memories, we will construct a vision of a world that is good and caring. And so we, too, will be moved to do acts of hesed, deeds of loving-kindness, performed without expectation of reciprocity. It is in the assemblage of such small acts of goodness, adding one small act of selflessness here to one small act of kindness there to one small act of love, that our perfect world will be built.

And then "justice will cascade like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)

*Rabbi Cardin, who received her ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary, is the author of numerous books and articles, including* The Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Life Cycle Events and Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: a Jewish Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss. *She is a member of JWI's Clergy Task Force.*
texts • Rut Rabba • 2 siman 14 on Ruth 1:8 • 5 siman 6 on Ruth 2:14

Read aloud:
MAY THE LORD DEAL KINDLY WITH YOU [my daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth]. Rabbi Hanina bar Ada said: The k’tiv is "ya’aseh" meaning "The Lord certainly will deal kindly with you." AS YOU HAVE DEALT WITH THE DEAD, since you have busied yourselves with their shrouds; AND WITH ME, since you have renounced your marriage settlements. R. Ze’ira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing about ritual purity or impurity or about what is permissible or prohibited. For what purpose then was it [the Book of Ruth] written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness.

SHE ATE HER FILL AND WAS SATISFIED AND HAD SOME LEFT OVER. Rabbi Yitzhak ben Maryon said: This verse can teach us that if a person is about to perform a good deed, he should do it with all his heart. For had Reuben known that Scripture would say of him “And Reuben heard it, and delivered him out of their hand (Gen. 37:21),” he would have carried Joseph on his shoulder to his father; and had Aaron known that Scripture would say of him, “Look, he is coming toward you (Ex. 4:14),” he would have gone out to meet [his brother Moses] with timbrels and drums. And had Boaz known that Scripture would say of him, “AND HE HANDED HER A PINCH OF ROASTED GRAIN; SHE ATE HER FILL AND WAS SATISFIED AND HAD SOME LEFT OVER,” he would have fed her with fatted calves.....

Commentary 2b
Rabbi Raffi Bilek draws a connection between acts of hesed, in this case, the incremental kindnesses practiced by Boaz toward Ruth as their relationship deepens, and mitzvot, the incremental deeds of attentiveness practiced by the Jewish people to bring about a deeper sense of relationship with G-d.

The first midrash above asks an interesting question: given that the biblical canon is not simply a collection of legends or even of history but is ultimately one of instruction (the literal translation of the
word “Torah”), what then was the purpose of writing this scroll, if not to instruct about purity and impurity and about that which is permitted and that which is prohibited? And the midrash answers: It is to teach us the legacy of kindness.

The second midrash above further asserts that it was Boaz’s smallest kindness – the offering of a few grains of parched corn – that earned him eternal recognition in the Jewish scriptures. Is this really the brand of kindness that the Sages mean to tell us was the very raison d’être of this book? Indeed it is. For the kindness one does to one’s fellow human being in the most mundane moments of everyday life is where true hesed is expressed. A relationship is not built on the grand, sweeping actions of fairytale stories, but on the smallest real-life acts that are often harder to do. It is easier to plan a honeymoon than it is to take out the trash after the vacation is over. It is easier to buy an expensive anniversary gift than it is to pick one’s dirty socks up off the floor day after day.

Likewise our relationship with G-d. It is easier to fast all day on Yom Kippur than it is to do a single act of t’shuvah [regret/remorse/repentance/return]. It is easier to host elaborate festival meals than it is to remember to thank G-d for His goodness day in and day out. For this reason Judaism prescribes mitzvot (likely related to the word tzavta, connection). Just as normative Jewish behaviors – mitzvot – are really a collection of small, incremental acts that, connected together, create a relationship with G-d, so, too, the Jewish model of sustaining human relationships is based on the connections fostered by consistently fulfilling small, mundane deeds of kindness toward others.

Ruth and Boaz both clung to G-d, both practiced incremental acts of kindness, and thus both embraced this paradigm of connection both to their Creator and to those around them. Ruth’s joining the Jewish people, and Boaz’s joining his destiny to that of Ruth, a Moabite princess, led to their becoming great-grandparents of King David. Here, then, is a grand journey that began as the aggregation of a thousand small steps.

Rabbi Bilek is the Outreach Coordinator for Project S.A.R.A.H. in New Jersey. A graduate of Brown University with an MSW from Yeshiva University, he worked at The Family Institute at Neve Yerushalayim in Jerusalem as a family therapist prior to his involvement with victims of domestic abuse in the Jewish community.

Conversations
1. Think of and share some of the small kindnesses done by you or for you that eventually led to an improved relationship.

2. The second midrash above implies that public acknowledgement of good behavior can be an incentive to behave even better, to do more, to “pull out all the stops.” Based on your own lived experience, do you agree?

3. Consulting a copy of the 85 verses that make up the entire Book of Ruth, enumerate the small acts of kindness that lead Ruth to trust Boaz, even to the point of lying down with him [literally, “uncovering his feet and lying down”] as he sleeps on the threshing room floor (chapter 3:6)?
Section 3: the necessity of imagining a different future

text • Megillat Ruth • chapter 1:14 - 17

They broke into weeping again and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. So Naomi said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law." But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you."

Commentary 3a

Deborah Rosenbloom, JWI's director of programs, comments:

Whenever I read this, I wonder what Ruth was imagining her future life would be like. What was her motivation to choose an unknown future, rather than turn back to a more predictable past? What made Ruth take this seemingly impulsive step? Imagine - if you had been married to a man who died at a young age, leaving you widowed, childless and poor - would you want to follow his elderly, impoverished mother to a new community, with unfamiliar rules and new mores?

Interestingly, the Hebrew text makes use of the vav ha’hipuch, a single letter which changes the future tense to past tense, and the past tense to the future tense. Our pasts are part of our futures, our futures are part of our pasts, and sometimes all it takes is a single letter, a single step, to start over again.

Conversations

1. What do you think was going through Ruth's mind as she made this momentous decision to change the course of her life? Was it an impulsive decision?

2. Do you think Naomi was relieved or sad when Orpah continued on her own way?

3. What do you think the relationship was like between Ruth and Orpah? Do you think they ever thought about each other again?
text • Rut Rabba • 2, siman 9 on Ruth 1:4 & 2 • siman 20 on Ruth 1:14

Shem ha’aretz Orpah. Shafakha 'orah lehemotah

...Rabbi Berekiah said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: Forty paces did Orpah go with her mother-in-law and [for this reason, retribution] was suspended for her descendant Goliath for forty days. As it is said, "And the Philistine drew near morning and evening and presented himself for forty days" (I Sam. 17:16). Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: Four miles did Orpah proceed with her mother-in-law and as a reward four mighty men descended from her. As it is said, "These four were descended from the Rafah" (II Sam. 21:22). ...Rabbi Yitzhak said: The whole of that night when Orpah separated from her mother, a hundred heathens raped her.....

1. oref means "nape of the neck". Due to the similarity in sound to Orpah, Orpah’s name is here connected with turning her neck [i.e., her back] on Naomi.

2. ha’Rafah. The “Rafah,” presumably a race of giants, are cited in 2 Samuel 16 – 22. Here the similarity in sound of the word harafah to the name “Orpah” is amplified and thus justifies, for the midrash writer attributing his remarks to Rabbi Judah in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak, the association between a family of giants and a Founding Mother, namely Orpah

3. ha’rifot is a word for grits (soaked corn meal, polenta) which must be pounded first in order to make them edible. Here the similarity in sound of the singular form of the word, harifah, is amplified and thus justifies, for this second midrash writer attributing his remarks to Rabbi Yitzhak, the association with Orpah’s being pounded by many men on the night of her return to her people.

Commentary 3b

Rabbi Marla Hornsten takes up the situation of Orpah once she returns to her own people in Moab, wondering if we can find a way to weave this unsung daughter-in-law compassionately back into our own tradition despite the fact that the midrash claims she was the mother of Israel’s foe, Goliath.

We frequently hear about Ruth and Naomi; we hear their voices, know their thoughts and motivations, but seldom do we hear from, or about Orpah. She’s a throwaway character to the larger narrative; and yet by her very presence, we know she is necessary and relevant to the story. Look closely at the text, pour over it, scour it— you will find nothing there to disparage her, nothing to vilify her, nothing but support for her choice to remain in Moab and encouragement for her to do so. How interesting that the verb shuv, return, is repeated in one form or another 10 times in the first chapter of the book. Wouldn’t that be enough for Orpah to believe that Naomi genuinely wanted her to return to her
home? And by the third time that Naomi outwardly pleads for her daughters-in-law to return, how could they not believe it was the right thing to do?

And yet, when Orpah follows her mother-in-law’s request, making the choice to return home while Ruth actually defies the request and remains with Naomi, Orpah becomes the villain for the writers of midrash, who claim that she turns her back on Naomi. They choose not to remember that Orpah has volunteered more than once to come with her. Then, the midrash continues, on the night Orpah returns to Moab she is raped by one hundred men. Perhaps the rabbis who created midrashim needed to see this assault as punishment for her decision to remain in Moab – or, as another midrash suggests, perhaps this gang rape reveals her own licentious nature. Other midrashim connect Orpah and haRafah, a race of giants referenced in II Samuel, thus making her the ‘mother ‘of giants including Goliath, the monstrous enemy who would someday meet Ruth’s great-grandchild, David.

It can be useful to ask why the midrash writers needed to villainize Orpah, especially since Naomi sends her off with a blessing in the text of the Book of Ruth itself. Must she be turned into something evil in order to highlight Ruth’s goodness? We can also ask: in our own time, do we still need both a heroine and a villainess or can we now make room for Orpah in our own story even though she ultimately returns to her own people?

Some of us who have non-Jewish daughters-in-law may wish we had a Book of Orphah that perhaps could help us bridge the gap between our Jewish culture and the cultures of our daughters-in-law. We accept Ruth because she clings to her mother-in-law and thus embraces us. They are the wives of some of our Jewish sons and mothers of some of our grandchildren. Our lives are tied up with theirs. We must embrace them.

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Conversations

1. Imagine a different future for Orpah. How would you rewrite her story?

2. Do you think that Orpah’s choice was a valid one for her day? What kind of choice do you imagine you would make in a similar situation?

3. How can our communities be more welcoming to inter-faith families?

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text • t'hillim • psalm 145 • Ashrei

א אתה חסידי חסידות ומשוביץ לכל ידша

Read aloud:
You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of all that lives. (Ashrei, Psalm 145:16)
A certain king and queen had seven loving sons who decided to wander the world, agreeing to meet up in a year’s time. The brothers, whose names happened to come from the days of the week on which they were born, did indeed converge on the same spot where they had parted twelve months before. Sunday couldn’t wait to share with his six brothers what he had found: a pair of spectacles that allowed him to see up to five hundred miles away. Monday was not terribly impressed, though, since he was now in possession of a magic fiddle whose music could put anyone to sleep. Tuesday tried not to scoff: he had learned to become a master pickpocket. Wednesday agreed that pickpocketing was a useful skill but claimed to have found something better: a coat with a magic pocket capable of fitting anything of any size inside it. Thursday respectfully disagreed since he had come across a twig that, when swished, could turn into any number of flying cudgels. Friday was sure he had outdone his brothers, as he was now the owner of a bow and arrow capable of shooting a seed out of a bird’s beak at a great distance. Saturday only shrugged: he had learned how to catch falling objects in his outstretched palm.

On their way home the brothers came to a kingdom decked all in black ever since the only child of its king and queen had mysteriously disappeared. So Sunday took out his spectacles and quickly led all his brothers toward the castle of an ashaf [wizard] where the magic spectacles had shown him the captured princess, her tears falling fast onto what could only have been a wedding dress! Then Monday began to play his fiddle and soon put to sleep everyone who had gathered for this unhappy marriage ceremony. Tuesday snatched her up and handed her to Wednesday, who slid her into his magic pocket. The brothers ran off with the princess sound asleep in Wednesday’s pocket but not fast enough to outrun the wizard’s army. So Thursday swished his twig and hundreds of huge wooden cudgels fell from the sky, beating back the soldiers. The wily and wicked ashaf, however, decided to take matters into his own hands: turning himself into a vulture, he swooped down and plucked the princess from Wednesday’s pocket. Fortunately, Friday pulled out his bow and arrow and shot the vulture in his eye, which caused the wizard-turned-bird-of-prey to drop the princess from his beak. She fell a great distance through the vast and empty sky – only to be caught by the outstretched hand of Saturday.

When the brothers returned the princess to her home, the king offered them half his kingdom and the princess as well, provided the decision about whom to marry were left to her. She looked from one brother to another, thanking them all for their service to her. How was she to decide whom to marry? In the end she chose Saturday, explaining that, although what he had found on his travels was really no possession at all, his open hand had brought her safely back to earth – and had won her heart.

*this highly abridged version has been adapted from Magical Tales from Many Lands, Orchard Books, London, 1993, as retold by Margaret Mayo, whose source was G. Friedlander’s 1918 collection of folktales called Jewish Fairy Tales and Stories.
Commentary 3c

*Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum* reflects on the capacity to feel hopeful for our children who have had difficult pasts, as well as on the gift that Ruth both receives and gives in joining the Jewish people.

Some of us may feel resigned, at least from time to time, to the idea that our children have been irreversibly harmed by a troubled past – due to a difficult home life, poor parenting, unhealthy relationships, poor decisions they themselves have made or any number of other circumstances. How often do we actually find the courage to then ask: must a troubled past always exert a stranglehold on the future?

One answer for me is inspired by Ruth, in the way she is described by the contemporary scholar Aviva Zornberg. Like Ruth, we mothers can learn how to fashion a future for ourselves and for our children out of more than the debris of a bleak past. That hopeful answer is amplified for me in the folktale cited above. Like the princess, we can learn to choose what is open-ended and uncertain while acknowledging what is closed and certain. A particular verse from Ashrei offers me an answer, too, a holy answer: we can learn to imitate the Source of Life, imitate reality itself, when we stop running from the closed past and clutching at the less-than-well-furnished present and learn instead to open our hands to the creative possibilities of the future. As the psalmist reminds us about the very nature of reality, “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” We, too, can learn to open our hands – palms up – in order to receive the future, rather than reach out palms down in order to tighten our grasp around whatever we may be able to salvage and snatch from the past.

Rather than seeing our children as irreversibly harmed by the past, we can learn to allow ourselves to see them more as part of an as-yet-unfinished world – even as Ruth does in allowing herself to see a real future by ‘returning’ to Judah with her embittered mother-in-law. Naturally this future-oriented way of looking at our children, perhaps still unborn as in the case of Ruth at the beginning of her story, calls for creativity on our part. The importance of such creativity and its expression in the holiday of Shavuot has been noted by a young Jewish educator named Levi Gershkowitz in a piece about moving toward Shavuot. He writes, "We are ascending toward the spiritual summit of Judaism – receiving the Torah. [As such], Shavuot is a crucial time for introspection [but] one that is quite different from [the introspection necessary for] the turning and returning of Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur, which are characterized by repentance and atonement [for past deeds]. The introspection [of this season, of Shavuot] is about creativity, about birthing a new way of being in the world…”

How fitting that we read Ruth at this particular node in the Jewish year! As the novelist Cynthia Ozick* observes, Ruth may be compared to Abraham in her perception that the Jewish people have birthed a new way of being in the world. But, likewise, Ruth herself births something new, as Aviva Zornberg reminds us when she quotes Martin Buber: "Behind every prediction of disaster there stands a concealed alternative." Zornberg adds, "Naomi presents Ruth with predictions of disaster. She tells Ruth that nothing good can come of Ruth’s following her. Yet there is a concealed alternative, [one] that Ruth articulates in her answer [that] is based on the future tense ["Where you go, I will go...."]. There is a narrow opening which the person of hayil, the person of strength, vitality, and courage, can find if she feels strongly enough both the closure of and the necessity for [new] life."
In the fairytale, the princess descends through the vast and empty sky – not only to a safe landing in an outstretched palm but to a new life as well. If you, too, feel yourself or your children falling, I wish you G-dspeed in your descent toward that which is best prepared to catch all of us – the open, creative hand of the Source of Life. That open, creative hand can set us down in a better future but it needs our help. Indeed it always needs our help, at least according to Jewish tradition: we are at all times the other half of a brit, or partnership. Like Ruth, we can fulfill our part of the partnership by letting go of would have/should have/could have and using the future tense instead. Like Ruth, we can also fulfill it by tapping concealed alternatives to predictions of disaster – being willing to become less bound by habit and despair and more receptive to the gift that the Source of Life extends to every one of us, our boundless creativity.


Rabbi Kirshbaum, who serves the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation of Princeton, NJ, was the lead author of Rethinking Purim: Women, Relationships, and Jewish Texts and has contributed to Embracing Justice, JWI’s revised Clergy Guide; to the Project S.A.R.A.H. website; and to A Guide to Jewish Practice: Everyday Living, a winner of the 2011 National Jewish Book Awards in the category of Contemporary Jewish Life and Practice.

**Conversations**

1. Can you think of a time when you’ve been in freefall and have allowed yourself to be gently caught? Can you imagine how to recreate (or create) such trust and faith?

2. Recalling Martin Buber’s observation that “behind every prediction of disaster there stands a concealed alternative,” can you share an example of the role that creativity has played in your life in bringing a ‘concealed alternative’ out of hiding?

3. Do you agree with Professor Zornberg that all Naomi was able to offer Ruth was a prediction of disaster?
Section 4: Acting on our learning

From Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, Chapter 1:17 we learn “The essential thing is not study, but action.” Here are a few ideas that we hope will inspire you to take the next step, even as conversations and exploration of healthy relationships continue.

1. Take an inventory of your gifts and talents such as hospitality, organizational skills, business or artistic sense, or an outgoing personality. Next, think about the needs of the different communities of which you would like to be a part of, or already are. What community needs can you contribute to by using your own gifts? List the steps you will take to make that happen.

2. Think about how your relationships would benefit from increased trust, and visualize what they would mean to you and to the recipient. Then commit yourself to doing random acts of kindness for your partner, child, friend, neighbor, colleague or community member.

3. Write a letter to your future self explaining how you envision who you want to be and the steps you will take to start on that journey. Seal the letter and pick a date for opening it, such as a yahrtzeit of a loved one, a birthday or anniversary, a holiday such as Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

4. Help imagine a new future for the smallest victims of domestic violence by participating in JWI’s National Library Initiative, a project that builds children’s libraries in battered women’s shelters. Learn more at www.jwi.org/nli.

5. Become an advocate for legislation that promotes the well-being of women and girls by joining JWI’s action network.

6. Make a contribution to support JWI’s programs and projects that work to end gender based violence, promote financial literacy and economic security, and celebrate women’s leadership. Learn more about JWI’s work at www.jwi.org.