

## JOFA PRESENTS THE MEGILLAT RUTH BOOK CLUB KIT

The Book of Ruth is traditionally read in the synagogue on the festival of Shavuot. The book, or more accurately the Megillah, contains a moving theme, an exciting plot, and a cast of compelling female characters. What better way to prepare for Shavuot than to form a book club with some friends to read, discuss and argue over this ancient and gripping story?

In order to facilitate a stimulating and rewarding discussion we have prepared some online resources. Feel free to use them as they are presented or to adapt them as you see fit. It is up to you to decide how many sessions to hold and how to divide the material. You can either break it up chronologically or thematically. The main thing is to enjoy the process of discussion and debate as you uncover new dimensions to a very old story.

Enjoy any or all of the six following Book Club discussion guides:

- Part #1 Introducing the Characters
- Part #2 A Discussion about Identity
- Part #3 Evocative Names
- Part #4 Bibliodrama
- Part #5 Poetry
- Part #6 Ruth Depicted in Art

We thank the following scholars for their contributions to this resource pack:

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**Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz**, teacher at London School of Jewish Studies, King's College London, and Cambridge is currently completing her PhD at University College London.

**Yael Unterman**, teacher and Bibliodrama facilitator. Her latest book is a work of fiction entitled *The Hidden of Things: Twelve Stories of Love & Longing*.

## Megillat Ruth Book Club Part #1 Introducing the Characters

*This section, rich in secondary rabbinic sources, can be useful when trying to flesh out the various key characters in the story.*

### Ruth

#### What do you think of Ruth?

- Was she courageous or irresponsible?
- Did she have any moral obligation to her mother in law?
- Did she have any moral obligation to her own parents?

#### What did the rabbis write about Ruth?

#### Babylonian Talmud Brachot 7b

מאי רות א"ר יוחנן שזכתה ויצא ממנה דוד שריוהו להקדוש ברוך הוא בשירות ותשבחות.  
Why "Ruth"? R' Yochanan said: Because she was worthy and from her emerged David, who saturated (*rivahu*) the Holy one, with songs and praises.

#### Midrash Ruth Raba 9:4

ושם השנית רות שראתה בדברי חמותה.  
"And the name of the second was Ruth." Because she saw (*ra'ata*) the words of her mother-in-law.

#### Yalkut Shimoni 600:2

ושם השנית רות מרתתת מן העבירה.  
"And the name of the second was Ruth" because she would tremble (*meratetet*) from transgressions.

#### Maharal - Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (c. 1520-1609), Babylonian Talmud Sota 42b

The sons of the one who kissed [Orpah] came so close to being connected yet they rejected it... If Orpah had never kissed, then you can say that she was never worthy to be connected, and there was no rejection. But when she kissed, she was worthy of being connected, because kissing is a form of joining, yet she separated. Therefore the sons of the one who kissed will fall into the hands of the one who cleaved, because they are opposites, they will defeat each other.

### Guiding Questions

- What special qualities do the rabbis detect in Ruth?
- Are there other qualities that you think they fail to mention?
- If so, what might they be?

## Orpah

### What do you think of Orpah?

- *Was Orpah selfish?*
- *Was she a victim?*
- *Was she sensible?*
- *Was she cruel?*

### What did the rabbis write about Orpah?

#### Ruth Raba 2:9

שם האחת ערפה שהפכה עורף לחמותה

The name of one was Orpah, for she turned the nape of her neck (*haphkha oreph*) to her mother-in-law.

#### Babylonian Talmud Sota 42b

ולמה נקרא שמה ערפה שהכל עורפין אותה מאחריה.

Why was she called Orpah? For everyone sodomized her (*orpin ota*) from behind.

#### Midrash Ruth Rabba 2:20

א"ר יצחק כל אותו הלילה שפרשה ערפה מחמותה נתערבו בה ערות גוים של מאה בני אדם.  
The night that Orpah left her mother-in-law she was intimate with one hundred men.

#### Babylonian Talmud Sota 42b

ערפה שמה ולמה נקרא שמה הרפה שהכל דשין אותה כהריפות.

Why was she called Horpah? Because everyone would thresh her like the chaff of wheat (*Haripos*).

#### Babylonian Talmud Sota 42b

These four were born to Orpah in Gath, and they fell into the hands of David and his servants. Who are these? R'Chisda said: Saf, Madon, Goliat, and Yishbi Bnov.

In the merit of four tears that Orpah cried for her mother-in-law she merited four mighty warriors.

### **Guiding Questions:**

- Are the rabbis sympathetic to Orpah?
- What are they saying about her morals?
- Are they defending her or accusing her?
- Why do you think the rabbis are making the comments they make?
- What do you feel about Orpah in light of these comments?
- If you were part of the rabbis' conversation what would you add to it?

## **Megillat Ruth Book Club Part #2 A Discussion about Identity**

*Much of the Book of Ruth revolves around identity; asserting identity (Boaz), fleeing from one's identity (Elimelech), reclaiming one's identity (Naomi), taking on a new identity (Ruth) and concealing one's identity (Ruth). Explore this central theme through the following questions by applying them to the various characters and circumstances in the story:*

What is one's identity? Can you hide your identity? Can you change your identity?

### **Hiding Identity**

- Can one really hide their identity?
- Is there a difference between being told to hide your identity and *choosing* to hide your identity?
- What would it be like to be told to hide your identity?
- Have you ever had to hide your identity? When and why?

### **Changing Identity**

- Can one really change their identity?
- Can you imagine yourself changing your identity?
- If you were Ruth, would you have gone with Naomi?
- What are areas that we have a change in identity? How does it work?

## Asserting Identity

- Why might one need to assert their identity?
- What can be the cost of asserting one's identity?
- What can be the cost of not asserting one's identity?
- What happens when one has multiple identities?

### Megillat Ruth Book Club Part #3 Evocative Names

*Upon a close reading on the Book of Ruth, you will notice that the names of the key characters have significant meanings and that when we retell the story using these names translated into English, we get a vivid picture of the story's significance for Israel:*

*(From Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible (2002), p. 254)*

*Once, many years ago, famine drove My-God-is-King and Pleasant-One from Bethlehem in the land of Judah to the land of Moab. There My-God-is-King died. His two sons Disease and Destruction married local women, but after a while, they too died, leaving only Pleasant-One and her two daughters-in-law. When they heard that there was food in Bethlehem, they set out to return. On the way, Pleasant-One released her two daughters-in-law and sent them back to begin new lives. Back-of-Neck tearfully turned and left, but Dewy stayed with her mother-in-law, now no longer Pleasant-One but Bitter-Woman, for God had killed her men. In Bethlehem, they turned to their kinsman, He-Who-has-Might. First God, then Pleasant-Woman, then Dewy, and then He-Who-has-Might planned to bring them together, and finally He-Who-has-Might married Dewy and from this union came He-Who-Serves, the grandfather of Beloved.*

Read this way, the story is an allegory for Israel's destiny, beginning with her bereavement and ending with her joy. Pleasant-Woman is Jerusalem/Judah, so often personified as a woman, the most lovely of women. Elimelekh is the king of Israel or the institution of kingship; the dead sons are the many dead children of Israel.

When Pleasant-Woman comes back to the land, Dewy the Moabite comes with her, and by mating with the remaining strength in the land (He-Who-has-Might), she revitalizes Israel. The combined efforts of these gracious three, all of whom act with *hesed* toward one another, make possible the rebirth of the lineage. And so 'a child is born to Pleasant-Woman' [Ruth 4: 17], from whom came Beloved [*and a redeemer comes to*

Zion' [Isaiah 59: 20]]. Beloved is David, the founder of the dynasty that ruled Judah until its destruction.

**Midrash Ruth Rabba 2:5 on Ruth 1: 2**

ושם האיש אלימלך ר"מ היה דורש שמות ר"י בן קרחה היה דורש שמות ושם האיש אלימלך שהיה אומר אלי תבא מלכות ושם אשתו נעמי שהיו מעשיה נאים ונעימים ושם שני בניו מחלון וכליון מחלון שנמחו מן העולם וכליון שכלו מן העולם.

*'And the man's name was Elimelekh'* [Ruth 1: 2]. Rabbi Me'ir used to explain names, and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha used to explain names. *'And the man's name was Elimelekh'*: because he used to say 'Kingship [*malkhut*] will come to me [*elai*]; *'and his wife's name was Naomi'*: because her deeds were lovely [*na'im*] and pleasant [*ne'imim*]; *'and his two sons' names were Machlon and Chilion'*: Machlon, because they were erased [*nimchu*] from the world, and Chilion, because they ended [*kalu*] from the world.

**Midrash Ruth Rabba 2:22 on Ruth 1:16**

ותאמר רות אל תפגעי בי לעזבך לשוב מאחריך מהו אל תפגעי בי אמרה לה לא תחטא עלי לא תסבין פגעיק מני לעזבך לשוב מאחריך מכל מקום דעתי להתגייר אלא מוטב על ידך ולא על ידי אחרת כיון ששמעה נעמי כך התחילה סודרת לה הלכות גרים אמרה לה בתי אין דרכן של בנות ישראל לילך לבתי תיאטראות ולבתי קרקסאות שלהם אמרה לה אל אשר תלכי אלך אמרה לה בתי אין דרכן של ישראל לדור בבית שאין שם מזוזה אמרה לה באשר תליני אליון עמך עמי אלו עונשין ואזהרות ואלהיך אלהי שאר מצות.

*'And Ruth said: Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you'* [Ruth 1: 16]. What is the meaning of *'Do not urge me'*? Ruth said to Naomi, Do not sin because of me, do not earn a punishment because of me'; *'to turn back and not follow you'*, 'for in any case it is my intention to convert, but it would be better if it was because of you and not because of someone else'. When Naomi heard this, she began to teach her about the laws of conversion. She said to her: 'My daughter, the daughters of Israel do not go to the theatres and circuses of the non-Jews'. Ruth said to her: *'Wherever you go, I will go'*. Naomi said to her: 'My daughter, Jews don't live in a house without a mezuzah.' Ruth said to her: *'Wherever you lodge, I will lodge'*. *'Your people shall be my people'*: these are the punishments and prohibitions meted out by a *beit din*. *'Your God shall be my God'*: this refers to the rest of the *mitzvot*.

### **Midrash Ruth Rabba 3:5 on Ruth 1:18**

ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה א"ר יהודה ב"ר סימון בא וראה כמה חביבים הגרים לפני המקום כיון שנתנה דעתה להתגייר השוה הכתוב לנעמי.

‘When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her’ [Ruth 1: 18]. Rabbi Yehudah bar Rabbi Simon said: Come and see how beloved converts are to God! When Ruth announced her intention to convert, the biblical text compares her to Naomi.

### **Megillat Ruth Book Club Part #4 Bibliodrama**

*Bibliodrama is a form of role playing or improvisational theatre using Bible stories. In Bibliodrama, the director reads through the selected text, stopping at points of interest to invite participants to step into the role of a character, or even sometimes an object, and to give it voice.*

*Deriving from the Jewish tradition of Midrash, Bibliodrama explores the unspoken in the lives of the characters, the “back story” or “subtext” in the written narrative, even the spaces between the words, to bring the bible alive. Bibliodrama honours the written text and never contradicts the biblical account, though it deeply explores and challenges biblical meaning. It becomes a window into the Bible and at the same time becomes a mirror in which participants can recognise parts of themselves.*

The following questions directed at the Ruth character have been suggested by Yael Unterman a teacher, author and Bibliodrama facilitator. Choose someone to play the role of Ruth (or take turns) and have your “Ruth” respond to the questions below.

- How did the ten years living in Naomi's house change you?
- Was Orpah similarly changed?
- How did it feel to part from Orpah?
- Did you know all along you would stick with Naomi, or was that a decision that arose for you in that moment?
- When you and Naomi arrived at her village, how did you feel the moment before you entered the threshing floor?

## Megillat Ruth Book Club Part #5 Poetry

*Below are several modern compositions that draw attention to aspects that are often overlooked in the story or present the familiar through fresh eyes. Read the original biblical text first, and then read the poems. Discuss what aspects the poems add to your understanding of the story, where they differ from the biblical text and where they take you by surprise.*

**Printed in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (eds.), *Rereading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994)**

### Ruth's Journey

**Ruth Whitman**

I.

I hated being a Moabite.  
 I thought the villagers  
 greedy, vulgar, noisy,  
 worshippers of Chemosh,  
 the god who devoured  
 human flesh.  
 My father wanted me  
 to marry our neighbour's son,  
 a stupid shepherd.  
 I was fifteen, trapped,  
 smothering in those  
 prison mountains.  
 Somewhere, I knew, there was  
 a different, larger world  
 waiting for me.  
 But how to find it?  
 A girl was expected  
 to stay at home forever.

2.

Naomi, a Hebrew woman from



starving Bethlehem  
came to Moab with her family.  
My people despised me  
for admiring these foreigners,  
but I was dazzled.  
Their son, Machlon, was a man  
I had dreamed of—  
tall, wise, kind.  
His grey eyes always  
smiled at me when I came  
to visit Naomi.  
He learned to speak  
our Moabite dialect,  
but I had no Hebrew yet.  
When Machlon asked me  
to marry, my father  
cursed me out of the house.  
I ran away, to Naomi,  
who welcomed me  
as the daughter she never had.  
She taught me  
all the womanly arts  
she knew:  
how to cook tasty dishes,  
how to sew and weave,  
to sing.  
She became my mother.

3.

After ten years,  
Naomi's husband died.  
Both sons grew sick and  
soon followed—my gentle Machlon  
and his brother, husband  
of my friend Orpah.  
We three women  
were left alone  
to live with our grief.  
In those arid mountains

the shadows every twilight  
 made us tremble.  
 In the crevice of  
 the limestone gullies,  
 lions lurked at night.  
 Naomi said, *Let us go back  
 to Bethlehem.* But Orpah  
 wanted to stay.  
 Naomi said to me, *Go,  
 I have no more sons  
 for you.*  
 But I said, *No,  
 you are my mother,  
 my family, my future.*

4.

Naomi and I packed  
 our clothes, our pots,  
 a little food,  
 and left the valley.  
 Down through the mountains,  
 across gaping sudden canyons,  
 hot, dusty, our dresses torn  
 from catching on thorns  
 and sharp boulders,  
 we came finally to the  
 rocky Dead Sea road.  
 It smelled of sulphur.  
 Judaea was on the other side.  
 But how to get across  
 the terrifying green expanse?  
 Naomi remembered the route south  
 to the Vale of Salt,  
 the marsh she had crossed  
 ten years earlier.  
 Our legs stinging with salt,  
 covered with mud and scratches,  
 we crossed into Judaea—  
 as desolate and barren

as the land we left behind.  
 The sea was turquoise,  
 a sea of death  
 where nothing could live.  
*Never mind*, said Naomi,  
*we have come this far*  
*and we are almost home.*  
 We came to a hut  
 shaded by a thorn tree,  
 where we found fresh water.  
 But we still had miles to go,  
 across the Judean hills,  
 to Hebron. Finally,

5.

we came to Bethlehem.  
 It was barely harvest.  
 We were exhausted, starving.  
 Naomi said, *Go to my cousin's field*  
*and find what the farmers*  
*have left behind.*  
 Her cousin, a kindly man,  
 invited me to help myself, saying  
*You will be safe in my field.*  
 I brought all the sheaves I could  
 back to Naomi,  
 who told me her plan:  
 that night, bathed and dressed  
 in my cleanest gown,  
 I found my way back  
 to the field of tents  
 where the farmers  
 were celebrating.  
 A full moon was shining,  
 I crept into the tent  
 where Naomi's cousin  
 lay sleeping.  
 I uncovered his naked feet  
 and curled up beside them.

He woke, startled.  
 Then smiled, recognizing  
 the woman from Moab.  
 My mouth tasted  
 his Hebrew name, round as a fruit:  
*Boaz.*

**Naomi: Loss [on Ruth 1: 1-5]**  
**Kathryn Hellerstein**

Suddenly, they were not ‘his sons’ but ‘my sons’,  
 and I sat at the edge of the field sprouting green,  
 far from the tawny hills, the thirsty stubble  
 we’d decided to leave just weeks before  
 for the sake of our hungry boys, wondering  
 why he had left me so soon. We thought the hunger  
 there would kill us. What made him die, here,  
 where we have more than enough? They saw me weeping  
 in the morning mist—drops bitter on my tongue,  
 on the grass blades. They sat by me on the stone wall,  
 one on each side, dear boys, and they cried, too.  
 We made a new home, anyway. We worked hard in the fields,  
 we made do without all the comforts of Bethlehem, without  
 their father, without my Elimelech. I came not to mind  
 sleeping alone. Years passed. The boys grew up.  
 They started looking at the neighbours’ daughters.  
 I wasn’t crazy about them marrying  
 local girls, but I couldn’t afford even

a messenger to Elimelech's relatives back home.

They chose well, Chilion his Orpah and Mahlon his Ruth,  
and their families made them sumptuous weddings, months ago.

I'm glad to have the young women around to help  
with the planting and the cooking. But now,  
just as suddenly as their father, both boys are gone!

How can such young brides be widows? They weep into their soup.

Their tears bleach the laundry and moisten the muddy paths.

Once again, seedlings come up, pushing aside the clods,  
pale leaflets furled in the fog. The crop promises  
to be good this year. But I will have no grandchildren.

**Ruth and Orpah [Ruth 1: 6]**  
**Kathryn Hellerstein**

‘There’s bread again in Bethlehem!’  
breathes Orpah, through her own dull ache  
toward where Ruth lies—sad, sleeping form.  
Ruth stirs, then sits up, wide awake.  
‘Naomi certainly will go  
When she is told.’ Ruth rubs her eyes.  
‘Should we go with her?’ ‘Yes, we must!’  
Bride-widows, both gasp in surprise  
that yet another change will come.  
Then Orpah gets up from her bed,  
washes her face, begins to pack  
her clothes and bracelets with bowed head.  
Ruth stands up, stretches. Then she cries,  
‘Our families! We will never see  
our fathers, mothers, sisters, friends!  
The land of Judah is far away.’  
But Orpah rolls her blankets, sheets,  
and pillow up for travelling,  
then over her bright, braided hair,  
she pulls a scarf, unravelling  
black fringes where she’d torn the edge  
in mourning, only weeks before.  
Reluctantly, Ruth folds her skirts

and underclothes and says no more.

**Ruth to Naomi: After the Threshing [Ruth 3: 6-15]**  
**Kathryn Hellerstein**

Without understanding them, I followed your words,  
hiding in shadows of the granary  
while threshers—men and boys—ate well and drank.  
They fell asleep on bales of hay, their sieves  
scattered across the piles of winnowed grain  
as careless as the bawdy jokes and songs  
they left off, mid-verse, slipping into dreams.  
Stone walls absorbed their even breathing and  
fresh dust from beaten husks. I held my breath  
as Boaz, laughing, a little drunk, yawned, belched,  
then lay down by a heap of corn, and slept.  
As you instructed, I came softly to  
that spot, uncovered his feet—their calloused heels,  
worn arches, in repose—and curled up there.  
At midnight, he turned over, brushed his foot  
against my scarf, and suddenly sat up.  
‘Who are you?’ his words probed into the dark.  
To him, the rough-edged shadow, darkness on  
pure dark, not knowing why, I answered, ‘Ruth,  
your handmaid. Spread your skirt upon me—you  
are a near kinsman.’ His reply blessed me  
as ‘daughter’. He praised me for kindness shown  
to you, Naomi, and to him, old man  
whose grace you ask through me. I never thought  
to follow after young men, rich or poor,  
or any man, since Mahlon, for when  
I followed you, I found my way through grief.  
He called me ‘daughter’ again, and ‘virtuous’. His beard  
tickled my ear. I shivered in the warmth  
of this man’s breath, as he explained your laws



that let the nearer kinsman of the dead  
be first to choose the widow and the land.  
I started to stand up. He told me, 'Sleep',  
and just before the dawn broke, helped me leave,  
unnoticed, as the moon slipped from a sky—  
indigo turned violet—and the sun  
inched up to gild the rooftops brilliant as  
the barley he poured in my heavy cape.  
You ask me, 'Daughter, who are you?' I'm filled  
with dreams. The chaff of widow falls away.

### **Megillat Ruth Book Club Part #6 Ruth Depicted in Art**

If you'd like to try something different than text-based study click on the fantastic link below. It contains numerous artistic depictions from the book of Ruth created by great artists from across the centuries. They include Michelangelo, Chagall, Blake, Tissot and Poussin. Take your time looking at these masterpieces and then discuss how they challenge, reinforce or shape your understanding of the story and the characters.



You can find more works of art here:

[http://www.womeninthebible.net/paintings\\_ruth.htm](http://www.womeninthebible.net/paintings_ruth.htm)