

UPDATED!

RETHINKING
Shavuot
WOMEN, RELATIONSHIPS
& JEWISH TEXTS

jwi

Rethinking Shavuot:

Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts

a project of



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Shalom Colleagues and Friends,

On behalf of the JWI Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community we are pleased to re-issue this wonderful resource, *Rethinking Shavuot: Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts*. This guide is designed to spark new conversations about iconic relationships by taking a fresh look at old texts. Using the text of the *megillah*, *midrash*, and modern commentary, the guide serves to foster conversations about relationships. It combines respectful readings of classic texts with provocative and perceptive insights, questions and ideas that can help shape healthier relationships. We hope it will be warmly received and widely used throughout the Jewish community.

We are grateful to our many organizational partners for their assistance and support in distributing this resource in preparation for the observance of Shavuot. We deeply appreciate the work of the entire Clergy Task Force and want to especially acknowledge Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, project manager and co-editor of this series of guides.

Please visit jwi.org/clergy to learn more about the important work of the Task Force. We welcome your reactions to this resource, and hope you will use it in many settings.

Wishing you a joyful Shavuot,



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Co-Chair, Clergy Task Force



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The Goal:

Conversations About Healthy Relationships

We've all noticed the sea-change.

It was 2012 when we first compiled this *Shavuot Guide*. No one at that time could have predicted where women – and men – would land in 2019. Our takeaways seven years ago about healthy relationships – based on the story of Ruth read worldwide on the holiday of Shavuot – seem almost quaint now. So while we've kept many of the texts and commentaries from our original version (Jewish holidays are timeless, after all) we're now asking some new questions:

Is it devotion or pathology?

Does generosity pay?

Is there another heroine here?

Why is betrayal of public trust such a big deal?

Who owns our future?

Whether or not you plan to stay up studying on the eve of Shavuot, an activity known as *leil tikkun shavuot*, whether or not you'll get to read or hear the Book of Ruth on Shavuot morning this year, we hope that this guide based on *megillat Ruth* will spark useful conversations about what healthy relationships can look like in 2019 – and maybe even beyond.

hag shavuot sameach,



Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, editor of *JWI's Holiday Guides*
Omer, Israel

FAQs and Facilitator Tips

Q: How can this guide be used?

A: Our dream is for the guide to be used as a part of Shavuot discussions, in homes, on campuses, in synagogues – wherever and whenever people gather together to share the holiday. Invite a group of friends for a festive Shavuot meal that includes guided conversations about relationships, in addition to blintzes and cheesecake! Incorporate discussions in your book clubs, synagogue groups, or as topics for informal *divrei torah* or rabbis' sermons.

Q: Is this guide for women only?

A: No, men are often part of the equation of a healthy relationship, and we hope they'll join the conversation!

Q: What is the recommended amount of time for the program?

A: Forty-five minutes to an hour will allow you to introduce the guide, read one text and commentary, and begin a conversation. An hour to 1½ hours would allow you to select readings from each of the five themes and have substantial conversations about each of them. If the group is really engaged, you can always plan to continue the discussion at a later date.

Q: What needs to be done before the discussion takes place?

A: Simply assign one person the responsibility to read the entire guide and to select the texts and commentaries that will be used for discussion. Alternatively, a more informal, free-flowing discussion may be fitting depending on the nature of the group. Either way, make sure each participant has a guide to follow. They can be downloaded [here](#) for free.

Q: What is the format of the program?

A: Once everyone is seated, the 'leader' should quickly recap the story of Shavuot, explain the goals of the program, the themes that will be discussed, and, briefly, some reasons for sharing this resource. Participants may be asked to think of the name of someone in whose honor or memory they want to devote this study. Ask for volunteers to read the text and the commentary out loud. Use the accompanying prompts to begin the conversation and if it doesn't lead to a vibrant discussion, move on to the next prompt.

Q. What is a *midrash*?

A: 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 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 in which the story of Ruth is situated.

Q: What if the group would like to read the full Hebrew texts?

A: This guide is designed to be accessible to everyone. The first line of every text is written in Hebrew, followed by the full English text.

Q: Are there guides like this one for other holidays?

A: Yes, the “Rethinking” series also includes guides for Purim, Sukkot and Shabbat. Please contact Deborah Rosenbloom with any questions or feedback at drosenbloom@jwi.org.

Translations of Tanakh [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 midrash collection known as Rut Rabba are mostly taken from the software collection known as Soncino Classics published by Davka.

Section 1

Is it Devotion or Pathology?

ג וַיָּמָת אֶלְמֶלֶךְ אִישׁ נַעֲמִי וַתִּשְׂאָר הִיא וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ:

Ruth 1: 3 – 7

translation

Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. Then those two, Mahlon and Chilion, also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband. She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had taken note of His people and given them food. Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah.

commentary

JWI's Deborah Rosenbloom turns the usual moral of the story upside down, asking us to consider Ruth as troubled and manipulated in unhealthy ways by her mother-in-law Naomi, rather than as heroic and generous.

Whenever I read the beginning of the Book of Ruth I wonder what Ruth was imagining her future life would be like. What was her motivation in choosing an unknown future rather than turning back to a more predictable past? What made Ruth take this seemingly impulsive step? Imagine: if you had been married to a man dead at a young age – leaving you widowed, childless, and poor – would you want to follow his elderly, impoverished mother to a new community full of unfamiliar rules and customs?

Until recently, I had thought of Ruth as a positive role model, a woman strong and fulfilled who made good choices. Lately I've been rethinking this and focusing on the dynamics of the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. I now think of Naomi as the more powerful woman who takes advantage of her daughter-in-law.

A quick recap for anyone unfamiliar with the story: The Book of Ruth opens as Naomi, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah, begins her journey back to Bethlehem after living a decade across the border in Moab. Naomi with her husband and two sons had moved to Moab because there was a famine in Israel. Both sons married Moabite women after their father died, and then the sons themselves die, without heirs. Orpah accompanies Naomi for part of the way and then turns back, having already experienced life with this family - the marriage, the unfruitful relationship, the poverty. She chooses to end her ties with them, head back home, and take her chances there. But Ruth famously says: "Wherever you go, I shall go, where you live, I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried." (Ruth 1:16-17). Based on these words, the rabbis teach us that Ruth converted to Judaism, accepting all the laws of Israel.

I find these words troubling. Ruth seems ready to merge her entire identity with Naomi's. "Wherever you go, I will go." Why does she want to follow a mother-in-law from across the border 'wherever she goes?' And even more troubling is that Naomi seems willing to exert power over Ruth, testing her obedience, pushing against boundaries. The story emphasizes Ruth's modest behavior as she gathers grain in the fields of Naomi's wealthy relative Boaz once they reach Bethlehem. According to the *midrash*, when Ruth stoops, she makes sure her skirt covers her legs instead of hitching it up as the other women do (Ruth Rabbah IV:6). But when Naomi tells Ruth to prepare herself to meet with Boaz at night, alone, in

the place where he sleeps during the barley harvest, Ruth does not protest, even when Naomi instructs her to “bathe, anoint yourself, put on clean garments, and lie down at his feet.” (Ruth 3:3) Is Naomi toying with Ruth and testing her loyalty? If so, what will Naomi’s next demand be?

We find out soon enough. Boaz marries Ruth soon thereafter; she conceives and bears a son. “And the women of the town said, “There is a son born to **Naomi.**” (4:13) Born to *Naomi*? “And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse to it. (Ruth 4:16). *Took* the child?

These sentences trouble me deeply. Why isn’t Ruth nursing her own baby? Why does Ruth let her take the baby? Is it because Ruth, isolated from her own family and community, having renounced her own identity, has lost her power to speak up, to be heard? Is the community taking advantage of her vulnerability?

All this makes me wonder what Ruth and Naomi’s relationship was really like. “Wherever you go, I will go.” I would worry if my daughter said that, wouldn’t you?

Deborah Rosenbloom is vice president of programs and new initiatives at Jewish Women International.

conversations

1. What is your *first* reaction to this unconventional view of Ruth?
2. Try coming back to this commentary after you’ve read through the Guide and had a chance to get used to the idea of Ruth being troubled instead of heroic. Has your reaction changed?
3. How are converts to Judaism treated in your community? Are they respected or are they put in positions that are uncomfortable for them, that push their boundaries in unhealthy ways, that remind them that they are not actually fully accepted with equal status to those born into the community? What safeguards can be installed to ensure that those who chose to become a Jew are not taken advantage of by the community’s establishment and others?

Section 2

Does Generosity Pay?

Ruth 2: 8 - 14

ח וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֵז אֵל רֹתֵהּ הֲלוֹא שָׁמַעַתְּ בְּתִי, אֵל תִּלְכִּי לְקַטְּ בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֵר

translation

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

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. 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, a former member of the Clergy Task Force, is the author of 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.

Rashi on Ruth 1:1

עשיר גדול היה ופרנס הדור ויצא מארץ ישראל

translation

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 resentment toward the poor] who came to press [their claims on] him; therefore he was punished.

commentary

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 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 doorsteps, 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.

Cantor Katchko-Gray, a member of the Clergy Task Force, is a fourth generation cantor, the second woman to serve a Conservative congregation as cantor, and founder of the Women Cantors' Network.

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]."
2. Leaving Eretz Yisrael in a time of famine is generally sanctioned. For what exactly is Elimelech condemned?
3. 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?
4. Have you taken an inventory recently of your gifts and talents such as hospitality, organizational skills, or an artistic sense? Are there needs in a community that you can fill by means of your own gifts?

Section 3

Is There Another Heroine Here?

Rut Rabba excerpts (2 § 9 on Ruth 1:4; 2 § 20 on Ruth 1:14)

שם האחת ערפה, שהפכה עורף לחמותה

translation

THE NAME OF THE ONE WAS ORPAH(1:4), because she turned her back [*oref*] on her mother-in-law.¹

...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).² ...Rabbi Yitzhak said: The whole of that night when Orpah separated from her mother, a hundred heathens raped her.....³

1. *oref* means “nape of the neck”. Due to 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

Rabbi Marla Hornsten considers Orpah after she returns to her own people in Moab, and wonders 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.

Seldom do we hear from, or about, Orpah, Ruth’s sister and wife of the man who is Ruth’s husband. She’s a throwaway character in 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 ten times in the first chapter of the book. Wouldn’t *that* be enough for Orpah to believe that Naomi genuinely wants her daughter-in-law to return to her home? And by the third time that Naomi outwardly pleads for both 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 go 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, as we read above, 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 will someday face off against Ruth's darling 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 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 turns her back on the Jewish people? Some of us who have non-Jewish daughters-in-law may wish we had a *Book of Orpah* that could help us bridge the gap between our Jewish culture and the cultures of those who have joined us as part of our families. We accept Ruth because she clings to her mother-in-law and thus embraces *us*. What do we gain by keeping today's Orpahs out of the Jewish story? What might we gain by trying to find a way to write them into our story? They are more than likely *not* the mothers of destructive giants; they are the spouses of some of our Jewish children and mothers of some of our grandchildren. We must not ignore them.

Rabbi Hornsten is a rabbi at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan and immediate past co-chair of the Clergy Task Force.

conversations

1. Imagine a different future for Orpah than the one expressed in the classical *midrash* literature. 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. Are you part of a community that welcomes inter-faith families, including spouses and partners of Jewish members? Can you share any specifics about how they are made to feel welcome?

commentary

Rabbi Nicole Roberts encourages us not to be too quick to judge those who leave; often leaving takes great courage.

A few years ago as a new rabbi, I brought my first conversion student to the *mikveh*. She had chosen 'Ruth' as her Hebrew name since she knew of Ruth's words of commitment to Naomi, Naomi's people, and their God:

Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following 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. (megillat Ruth 1:16)

These words resonated with the truth in her soul. She emerged from the waters of the *mikveh* a Jew, and we celebrated, both of us knowing that she had felt Jewish long before that moment. This is not the case,

however, for all who begin to walk a Jewish path. Some walk a few strides, only to realize that Judaism does *not* ring true to their souls. We must celebrate *that* moment of discovery too, when a student finds the spiritual clarity to say, “I tried it, and it wasn’t for me.”

That clarity sometimes comes only after a period of discernment — of living “as if.” In our current polarized, heated political environment, society is often quick to judge a change of heart as “flip-flopping” and a change in behavior as an insincere gesture. But the opposite is often true: we emerge from a period of discernment with greater clarity and commitment, having discovered where our heart truly belongs.

Most ancient commentaries, *midrashim*, depict Ruth’s sister Orpah in a generally unfavorable light, treating her as a foil for the virtuous Ruth. Very few find Orpah heroic for having walked (*hal’chah*) a few discerning steps alongside her sister and their mother-in-law Naomi. Today we can admire Orpah’s courage for going her own way in the end and following her own path, come what may. All too often, however, one who chooses to leave a relationship — with a religion or with a partner — encounters the harsh judgment found in the *midrash* above: Orpah was deserving of punishment for having “separated” (*par’shah*) from a relationship that didn’t win her heart the way it did Ruth’s. This point of view holds that Orpah rejected “us” for “them.” It sees only right and wrong, not the ‘right for you and wrong for me’ that comes from walking a journey of discernment.

Rabbi Roberts is a senior rabbi of North Shore Temple Emanuel in Sydney, Australia and a member of the Clergy Task Force.

conversations

1. In what realms of society is a change in conviction a sign of strength, rather than weakness? In science? academia? politics? business? religion? parenthood?
2. Think about how changes of heart, faith, behavior, or political stance are portrayed in today’s media. Does gender play a role in public opinion about such a change or in the language used in talking about it?
3. Are we more accepting of journeys of self-discovery, personal growth, and discernment when watching a film or reading a book than we are in “real life”?
4. Have you ever questioned your discernment because it was difficult to leave a relationship?
5. When has fear of judgment or harsh consequences kept you from making a decision that was right for you?

Section 4

Why is Betrayal of Public Trust Such a Big Deal?

Rut Rabba excerpts (1 § 4 on Ruth 1:1)

למה נענש אלימלך ע"י שהפיל לבן של ישראל עליהם....

translation

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.

Rut Rabba: p'tichtaot siman 7. Rut Zuta: parsha alef

כל מקום שנאמר "ויהי" צרה...

translations

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

Rabbi 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 and minor collections of *midrashim* on Ruth, 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. Commentators on the biblical text 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 feel hunger, the hunger for community leaders who model healthy relationships.

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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. Can you name current political or other leaders who *do* model integrity and a concern for others in their communities?
3. Can you share an occasion when you have consciously modeled a characteristic needed for a healthy relationship within a community?

commentary

Rabbi Andrea Steinberger suggests that we look at the damage to personal relationships within a family, and not only to the plight of a community, when reading the story of Ruth.

One of the ancient commentaries on the Book of Ruth quoted above notes that the word *vayehi* ["and it came to pass"] is used twice in the opening sentence. For some writers of these commentaries such an occurrence is a double red flag: according to *midrash*, wherever the word *vayehi* appears in the Bible, it implies woe. Thus, since *vayehi* is used twice in the same verse, it must imply a double woe. According to one of these writers, *vayehi* used twice at the beginning of *Ruth* implies a famine of bread and also a famine of Torah – that is, a lack of moral learning in Judah, a part of the Land of Israel. The other *midrash* leaves aside the subject of woe and concerns itself with the early death of Ruth's father-in-law, the wealthy Elimelech. This *midrash* concludes that he died young because of his selfishness and irresponsibility in fleeing his community during a famine. Indeed Elimelech's two sons, the young husbands of Ruth and her sister Orpah, also die early deaths not long afterwards. The early death of a father followed by the premature deaths of both his sons could also be taken as the double woes hinted at in the first verse of the Book of Ruth.

Today we don't think about the prospect of being punished with an early death after causing damage and betraying trust in the public sphere. Likewise, if we were to look for double woes at the beginning of the Book of Ruth, we would probably not be thinking of bread-famine and Torah-famine nor even about famine *per se*, but rather about the damage that Ruth's wealthy father-in-law Elimelech did to his community by fleeing during a severe shortage of food and about the damage that he caused his own family.

It is not uncommon today for most of us to learn details, even intimate details, about the families of men and women in the public eye who have damaged and/or betrayed others. Many of us don't know quite what to do with all this unsolicited information about the far-reaching, and often highly personal, consequences of bad public behavior on spouses and children.

The *midrashim* above are also concerned with damage and betrayal. But their explanations for the consequences of such behaviors are anchored in a more direct understanding of cause and effect than ours are likely to be. In the first *midrash*, the cause of damage is extreme selfishness and the effect is punishment by early death. In the second *midrash*, the cause of betrayal is a kind of famine (famine of Torah) and the effect is a lack of morality in abandoning a community. It is tempting to wonder about the kind of commentaries that will grow out of stories of damage and betrayal in our own time. We can hope that a healthy emphasis will be placed on damage to, and betrayal of, the families of perpetrators – and to the need for acts of *t'shuvah*, repentance, and where possible, rebuilding trust and restoring relationships to a new level of health within those families.

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conversations

1. Share examples of leaders or public personalities who have betrayed the public trust or acted irresponsibly to the point of causing significant damage, and how these actions seem to have impacted their own families. What does your family or inner circle tend to do when it learns about such examples? For instance, do these stories become cautionary tales, something like fables with a moral at the end? Do you express compassion for those now thrust into the public eye along with their relative?
2. Sometimes acts of betrayal are exposed by courageous whistle-blowers. Does your family have a whistle-blower? If not, what do you think prevents members of your family from speaking hard truths to one another?
3. Would you be willing to share an example of a family or a couple known personally to you that is in a healthier place than they were before? How did they get there?

Section 5

Who Owns Our Future?

Jewish folktale*

A certain king and queen had seven loving sons who decided to meet up in a year's time after wandering the world. When these brothers – who were called by the days of the week on which they were born – finally met again, they couldn't wait to share what they had found. Sunday had obtained a pair of spectacles that allowed him to see up to five hundred miles away; Monday, a magic fiddle whose music could put anyone to sleep; Tuesday had learned to become a master pickpocket; Wednesday, something better: a coat with a magic pocket capable of fitting anything of any size inside it; Thursday, a twig that, when swished, could turn into any number of flying cudgels; Friday, a bow and arrow capable of shooting a seed out of a bird's beak at a great distance. But Saturday simply shrugged: he had merely learned how to catch falling objects in his outstretched palm.

On their way home the brothers came to a kingdom decked in black ever since the only child of its king and queen had mysteriously disappeared. Sunday, with his magic spectacles, was able to lead all his brothers toward the castle of a wizard where the captured princess sat with 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 all the guests at this unhappy marriage ceremony. Tuesday, the pickpocket, snatched her up and handed her to Wednesday, who slid her into his magic coat. 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 wizard, however, decided to take matters into his own hands. He turned himself into a vulture, swooped down, and plucked the princess from Wednesday's care. Fortunately, Friday's arrow shot the vulture in its 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 she knew that what he had found on his travels was no possession at all and didn't require much skill – his open hand had brought her safely back to earth – and had won her heart.

*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

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum reflects on the capacity to feel hopeful for ourselves and our children who, like Ruth, may have had difficult pasts.

Some of us may feel resigned to the idea – at least from time to time – that we or our children have been irrevocably harmed by a troubled past for which we or they are not to blame. But must a troubled past always exert a stranglehold on our future? Here is an answer from contemporary scholar Aviva Zornberg found in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. Quoting Martin Buber, Zornberg notes that *behind every prediction of disaster stands a concealed alternative*. She then 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 that Ruth articulates in her answer, based on the future tense: *Where you go, I will go....*”

We who wonder about the effects of a difficult past can learn something from Ruth-who-uses-the-future-tense. Especially if we also consider two other texts: a single verse in psalm 145, (“*Ashrei*”) and the folktale above about the seven brothers and the princess. We really can learn how to fashion a future out of more than the debris of a bleak past. Ruth allows herself to envision a real future by leaving her home in Moab and going to Judah with her embittered mother-in-law. According to Zornberg, she is a young woman who, unafraid of speaking in the future tense, thus remains open to “concealed alternatives.” In Psalm 145, the psalmist speaks of God’s hand “opening” and satisfying the desire of every living thing, not about God’s hand grasping some kind of tool that can help satisfy those desires. The value of an open hand can also be seen near the end of the folktale when Prince Saturday, the brother who wins the heart of the princess, opens his hand, palm up, in order to receive the future rather than tighten his grasp, palm down, around something he *might* be able to salvage from the past.

So in order *not* to think of ourselves or our children as irrevocably harmed, we have to allow ourselves the possibility of a still-concealed, as-yet-unfinished world, a world that can be plied with one of the greatest gifts given us by the Source of life – our boundless creativity. Ruth steps into such a world when she decides to go with Naomi, creating a different future for herself by first using the future tense with intention. Saturday, the brother with seemingly nothing to show his siblings after a year of traveling, also begins to create new possibilities for himself when he gently catches the princess who has descended through the vast and empty sky of a strange country to a safe landing in his outstretched palm.

We, too, can learn to unclench our fists, letting our creativity reveal once-concealed alternatives to us. Further, in the spirit of Saturday, the brother named for *Shabbat*, we can remember that resting and waiting have a part to play in this process.

Rabbi Kirshbaum now lives near Beersheva, Israel and works on behalf of Women Wage Peace. She is active in JWI's Clergy Task Force and is the project manager for its [Holiday Guides](#) for Shavuot, Sukkot, Purim, and Shabbat.

conversations

1. Can you think of a time when you yourself have been in free-fall 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?

Acting on Our Learning

From *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of our Fathers, we learn “the essential thing is not study, but action” (1:17).

Here are a few actionable items that we hope will inspire you to act, even as your conversations and explorations of healthy relationships continue.

1. Plan a late-night study session for erev Shavuot, complete with *blintzes* and ice cream sundaes or other dairy foods, using this *Shavuot Guide*. Additional copies can be downloaded [here](#).
2. Doing or receiving an act of kindness benefits both the giver and the recipient. Commit yourself to doing random and not so random acts of kindness for friends, colleagues, family, and strangers, and enjoy the shared happiness your act provides.
3. Read [this article](#) about the benefits of low-stakes, casual friendships. Then think about how your relationships, even the most low-key ones, could benefit from increased trust between you and the recipient.
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 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 jwi.org.



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JWI is the leading Jewish organization working to end violence against women and girls in the U.S. and worldwide, and empower women through leadership development and financial literacy. Our advocacy and programmatic initiatives work to ensure economic security and end domestic violence, dating abuse, sexual assault on college campuses, gun violence and human trafficking. JWI 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.