



RETHINKING

*Shavuot*

WOMEN, RELATIONSHIPS  
& JEWISH TEXTS



# 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 guide. We also thank our Task Force members Rabbi Amy Bolton, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, Rabbi Raffi Bilek and Cantor Deborah Katchko-Grey for their participation in this project.

Please visit [jwi.org/clergy](http://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 Relationships

Each booklet in our Rethinking series highlights different aspects of safe and healthy relationships. For Shavuot 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, whose intersecting stories are given voice each year on Shavuot. We think of them actually as three ways to journey toward safety and well-being. They are:

- *the importance of living in community in times of distress*
- *the need for small acts of kindness in order to build trust*
- *the necessity of imagining a different future in order to escape a difficult past*

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. I especially hope it 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.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum" with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum

# 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 dv'ar torahs 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 1 ½ hours would allow you to select readings from each of the three 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 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 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 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. 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. The full texts in Hebrew can be found in PDF form at [jwi.org/clergy](http://jwi.org/clergy).

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.

Q: What is the format for 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: 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](mailto:drosenbloom@jwi.org).

# Theme: The importance of living in community

Text • Megillat Ruth • Chapter 1:1-2

א וַיְהִי, בַּיָּמִי שֶׁפָּט הַשְּׁפֹטִים, וַיְהִי רָעַב, בְּאֶרֶץ

1 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.

2 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 Megillat Ruth 1:1

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

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

עשיר גדול היה ופרנס הדור ויצא מארץ ישראל

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.

Text • Rut Rabba: P'tichtaot siman 7. Rut Zuta: Parsha alef

כל מקום שנאמר "ויהי" צרה....

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 by Rabbi Ari Lorge

*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. 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. 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 excellent role models 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.*

**Rabbi Lorge** is the co-founder of Reyut: The Jewish Campaign for Healthy Relationships with his twin sister, Sari. He currently serves New York City's Central Synagogue as assistant rabbi. He is co-chair of JWI's Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community.

## Conversations

1. Rabbi Lorge's commentary describes Elimelech, Ruth's late father-in-law, as having set a negative example for his community by abandoning them. On the other hand, his widowed daughter-in-law Ruth is shown as a positive role model throughout Chapter 2 of the Book of Ruth. Do you think Ruth's actions are likely to make her feel welcome and accepted by the community from the start? It's not unlikely that the other young women, at least, will become jealous of her industriousness and/or of Boaz's attentions to her. Can you share ways in which you've successfully entered a new community and perhaps dealt as a newcomer with the jealousy or suspicions of others?
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 by Cantor Debbie Katchko-Gray

*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 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.*

*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 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. 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?
2. 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?
3. When a community or institution is facing difficult times, how do you know whether to stay and share the struggle or whether it is time to leave?

# Theme: The power of small acts of kindness in building trust

Text • Megillat Ruth • Chapter 2:8-14

ח וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֵז אֵל רוּת הַלּוֹא שְׁמַעַת בְּתִי, אֶל תִּלְכִּי לְקַט בְּשָׂדֵה אַחֵר

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 G-d 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.”

## Commentary by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin

*While a few of us in this world do have great power, 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 realizes we are in need. When someone looks beyond any inconvenience we might be causing, and determines to do an act of kindness without any certainty of personal benefit, we are blessed. 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 through the assemblage of such small acts of goodness, adding one small act of selflessness, to one small act of kindness, 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** is the founder of the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network and the Baltimore Orchard Project, which both grow and distribute food to the needy. Her publications include *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 served on JWI’s Clergy Task Force and received her ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS & BUILDING TRUST

Text • Rut Rabba • 2 siman 14 on Ruth 1:8 • 5 siman 6 on Ruth 2:14

יעשה ה' עמכם חסד ר' חנינא בר אדא אמר יעשה כתיב כאשר עשיתם

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.

## Commentary by Rabbi Raffi Bilek

*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.*

*It was Boaz's smallest act of kindness – letting her glean in his field and drink his water – 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 (kindness) 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 cook a meal 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 Hebrew 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; they 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 Ruth, a Moabite princess, led to their becoming great-grandparents of King David. This grand journey that began as an act of kindness was the sum of a thousand small steps.*

**Rabbi Bilek** is 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 and also was the Outreach Coordinator for Project S.A.R.A.H. in New Jersey. Currently he is program manager for the Montgomery County Abuser Intervention Program in Rockville, MD, and the Director of the Baltimore Therapy Center.

SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS & BUILDING TRUST

## Conversations

1. Have you ever done or received small acts of kindness that eventually led to an improved relationship?
2. Do you agree that public acknowledgement of good behavior can be an incentive to behave even better and to do more?
3. Consulting a copy of the 85 verses that make up the entire Book of Ruth, enumerate the small acts of kindness that led 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).

# Theme: The necessity of imagining a different future

Text • Megillat Ruth • Chapter 1:14-17

יִתְשַׁנָּה קוֹלָךְ, וַתִּבְכְּיִנָּה עוֹד; וַתִּשְׁקַע עֲרֹפֶה לַחֲמוֹתָהּ, וְרוּת דָּבְקָה בָּהּ...

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 G-d, my G-d. 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 by Deborah Rosenbloom

*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.*

**Deborah Rosenbloom** is the co-editor of the “Rethinking” guide series. She is JWI’s Vice President of Programs and New Initiatives and works closely with the Clergy Task Force.

## 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? What kinds of memories of one another is each of these women likely to have? What kinds of regrets? What kinds of hopes for one another?

## שם האחת ערפה, שהפכה עורף לחמותה

The name of the one was Orpah (1:4), because she turned her back [oref] on her mother-in-law.<sup>1</sup>

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

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 by Rabbi Marla Hornsten

*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 Orpah 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.*

**Rabbi Hornsten** is a rabbi at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan, where she has been since her ordination in 2000. She is the co-chair of JWI's Clergy Task Force and is also involved with domestic violence prevention work in her local community.

## 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. "Some of us who have non-Jewish daughters-in-law may wish we had a Book of Orpah that perhaps could help us bridge the gap between our Jewish culture and the cultures of our daughters-in-law." If you are such a mother-in-law or daughter-in-law, what would you be sure to include in your Book of Orpah?

## Text • Middle Eastern Jewish folktale\*

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 by Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum

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

*Like Ruth, parents 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. Rather than seeing our children as irrevocably harmed by the past, we can learn to allow ourselves to see them as part of an as-yet-unfinished world – even as Ruth does in allowing herself to see a real future by 'returning' 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 Dr. Aviva Zornberg reminds us when she quotes Martin Buber: "Behind every prediction of disaster there stands a concealed alternative."*

## IMAGINING A DIFFERENT FUTURE

*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 haves/should haves/could haves 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.*

*\*The essay by Cynthia Ozick and the transcription of a shiur [exegetical lesson] of Aviva Zornberg’s can be found in Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story, edited by Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballantine Books, 1994.*

**Rabbi Kirshbaum** continues as an active member of JWI’s Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community from her home in Israel and is the project manager and co-editor for its holiday guides. She served as rabbi of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Princeton, NJ before making aliyah in 2013. A contributor to the Project S.A.R.A.H. website and to A Guide to Jewish Practice, she now spends most waking hours helping to grow a new non-partisan movement of many thousands of Israeli women called Women Wage Peace.

## 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?

# Acting on Our Learning

From Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, Chapter 1:17 we learn that “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. 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. 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](http://jwi.org/nli).)
4. Become an advocate for legislation that promotes the well-being of women and girls by joining JWI’s advocacy network.
5. 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](http://www.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.