



ICJW Online Study Program

“The Jewish Festivals”

Study Guide for the Book of Ruth

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I. Journeying: “Vayelech”

One of the core themes of *The Book of Ruth* is how life is filled with journeys; the theme weaves its way throughout the book, and is echoed in the Torah as a whole. Look at how the word “Vayelech” is used in Braishit, for example, and then consider how, as the Book of Ruth unfolds, the word grows richer and richer with meaning and associations:

Consider: what is the reason for, and nature of, each of these journeys? What inner resources does the person going on the journey seem to possess? What are they searching for or hope to find? Do they evoke any journeys you yourself have taken?

Genesis

“And God sent him out of Paradise to work the earth from which he had been taken.” (Genesis 3:23)

“And God said to Avram Go-you-forth [*lech l’cha*] from your country, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.... So Avram went [*va’yelech*] as the Lord had commanded him.” (Gen. 12: 1-4)

“Let us call the maiden and ask (for an answer from) her own mouth. They called Rivka and said to her: Will you go with this man? [*ha-telkhi im ha ish hazeh*] She said: I will go [*elekh*].” (Genesis 24:58)

“And Jacob left [*v’yetzey*] Beersheva, and went toward [*v’yelech*] toward Haran...[and he dreamed of a ladder, and the Lord stood above it, and said] behold I am with thee and will watch over you wherever you go [*telech*], and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee [*lo ehezahv’cha*]....” (Genesis 10-15)

Book of Ruth

“...there was a famine in the land and a man went out from [*va’yelech*] from Beit Lechem-Judah to reside in the fields of Moab, he, his wife, and his two sons.” (Ruth I.1)

(Why do you think that at the very beginning the Book of Ruth the text tells us that the story takes place “when the judges ruled” and it doesn’t tell us Elimelech’s name --or his wife’s, or his sons’ -- until verse 2?)

“Entreat me not to leave you [*l’ahzivaych*], to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go [*t’ilkhi*] I will go [*aylech*].” (Ruth I.16)

“I went away [*ha’lachti*] full, and I returned empty.” (Ruth I.21)

“Is this the one whose actions were fitting and pleasant [ne’imim]? In the past she used to go in a litter, and now she walks barefoot, and you say, Is this Naomi? In the past she wore a cloak of



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fine wool, and now she is clothed in rags, and you say Is this Naomi? Before her countenance was ruddy from abundance of food and drink, and now it is sickly from hunger, and yet you say, Is this Naomi?” (Ruth Rabba)

“And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, I would like to go to the fields [*aylcha-na*]...and [Naomi] said Yes, my daughter, go [*l'chi biti*].” II.2.

II. Lovingkindness: “Chessed”

Another core theme in the Book of Ruth is the idea of **חסד**. We can also trace the word in Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim. What kind of actions are considered expressions of **Chessed**? What kind of actions are considered expressions of **Chessed** in the Book of Ruth? After you consider these examples, think about the role of **Chessed** in your life – what might it mean to have “lovingkindness” *toward* ourselves? *Within* ourselves? Do you have any experience of God’s **Chessed**? What would help us bring more lovingkindness into our own lives?

Exodus

"And YHWH passed before [Moses's] face and called out: "The Lord! the Lord!--a God compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness [*chesed*] and faithfulness, showing loyalty [*chesed*] to the thousandth generation." (Exodus 34: 6-7)

Hosea

"And I will betroth you unto me forever; I will betroth you with righteousness [*tsedek*], justice [*mishpat*] and in lovingkindness [*chesed*], and in mercies [*rachamim*]." (Hosea 2:21)

Book of Psalms

"I will worship in your Temple and praise your name for your lovingkindness [*chesed*] and for your truth...In the day when I cried you answered me...Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you will revive me...."

Book of Ruth

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law "Go, return, each of you to her mother's house, and God deal with you kindly [*chesed*], as you have dealt with the dead and with me." (I.8)

And she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, saying, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not failed in his kindness [*chesed*] to the living or the dead!" (II. 19-20)

"Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty [*chesed*] is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich." (III.10)



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III. What does it Take to Make a Difference?

1. On the road from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi turns to her two daughters-in-law, and encourages them to return home. After a great deal of persuasion, Orpah cries, kisses her mother-in-law, returns to Moab and then, as one commentator has said, “falls out of history.” How should we view Orpah’s decision? What are the qualities she possesses, and how do they differ from the qualities we associate with a person who *changes* history? Is there an “Orpah” within you? A “Ruth”? a “Naomi”?
2. At the very beginning of the book of Ruth, Elimelech is described only as an Ish (Man). And in chapter four of the book of Ruth, Naomi’s “kinsman” also remains nameless. How does that affect the way we view the two men, and why might the text portray them anonymously? Why do they *lack* names? What aspect of ourselves would we rather not “name”?
3. What’s your view of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel’s comment that Elimelech was “one of the leaders of his generation. But when the famine came, he said, “Now all Israel will come knocking at my door for help, each one with his basket. He therefore arose and fled from them.” How does that compare with your views about the social responsibility of our leaders? About our responsibility for others, in times of hardship? What does it mean to you to be a leader? Who is the leader within you? During crisis situations? During transitions? During times of joy?
4. How does the text suggest what motivates Boaz to pay special attention to Ruth? To whom do you find yourself paying special attention? How do you express it?
5. Notice that Boaz honors the laws of *peah* -- leaving a corner of his field for the poor to glean. How might that relate to the inner meaning of the “spiritual harvest” of Shavuot? Given that most of us are not farmers today, how might we as individuals “leave a corner” of our “fields” now?
6. Naomi reacts to Ruth’s report of her day in the field by saying (2:20): “Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not left off his kindness to the living and the dead.” How does that indicate to us that she has changed? What is the text suggesting to us about how each of us can transform another’s feelings and behavior from depression and sorrow to gratitude and well-being? From a sense of victim-hood to hope?

IV. The Community and the “Stranger Among Us”

1. Trace the role of the *community* from the beginning of the story to the end. How and when do members of the community appear? When are there groups of men and when are there groups of women? What do the various communal scenes show us? What does the Book of Ruth seem to be suggesting to us about how we treat each other in our own communities and how we *should* treat each other?
2. What do you think the townspeople feel and see when Naomi enters Bethlehem? (I.19). How has she changed? Do they see Ruth with her? How do you imagine Ruth feels when she enters Bethlehem with her mother-in-law?



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3. Why do you think the text keeps describing Ruth as the “**Moabite**”? When does it *stop* describing her that way? What’s the effect of the change? How does the change correspond to the way we ourselves relate to the “strangers among us” in our own day?

V. Redemption

1. Boaz is said, in chapter 4:12, to have descended from Judah and Tamar. Go back and read the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis (38), which interrupts yet another story: the selling of Joseph to Egypt. How do you think the stories may be interconnected with one another? In what ways does the Book of Ruth “redeem” the earlier story? Why and how are the actions of Tamar, Naomi, and Ruth so important? What is the Tanach suggesting to us about the vital role women played in the spiritual history of Israel?

2. Ruth is a “Jew-by-choice,” a convert to Judaism, who gives birth to the child who becomes the ancestor of King David. How do we regard Jews-by-choice today? What is it, do you think, about the character of Ruth and the character of Boaz and the meaning of their *marriage* that merits their being the ancestors of King David?

VI. Survival and Spiritual Accounting

The Book of Ruth takes place during the barley harvest. Barley is the second of the seven species, often considered the “poor people’s bread,” and the barley harvest takes place during the Omer period between Pesach and Shavuot. It’s a time of great trepidation for farmers, for as botanist Nogah Hareuveni from Neot Kedumim explains, cold northern winds, on the one hand, and the *hamsin*, on the other, can bring either blessing or disaster to the crops. As the Talmud (Baba Batra 147a) says:

“The northern wind is beneficial to the wheat when it has become 1/3 ripened, and damages the olive trees when they have blossomed. The southern wind is damaging to wheat when it has become 1/3 ripened, and is beneficial to the olives when they have blossomed.”

1. How might the tension of the weather and winds during this period in the land of Israel relate to the mood and tensions of the Book of Ruth?

2. “What’s good for the wheat may damage the olives....” In Jewish tradition, the Omer period has become a time for each person also to take a spiritual account. How do we balance the conflicting tensions, the “cold northern winds” and the “hot dry winds” within our own lives as individuals, as Israelis, and as Jewish women?



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VII. “Your People will be My People”: The Talmud on Conversion

“And your people will be my people,” says Ruth. Her process of “conversion” may seem very foreign to us, for whom the process of conversion to Judaism has become much more complicated. The Talmud proposes that process. Read the texts from the Talmud below. How did the rabbis draw on the Book of Ruth in their discussion? Consider:

1. How did the rabbis redefine the process of conversion? What are the three-fold halachic requirements of conversion?
2. How stringent must the demands on the convert be?
3. How did they view the desire to convert to Judaism in order to marry a Jew?