

2007 Selection



Study Guide for  
**Disobedience**

by Naomi Alderman

Touchstone Publishers



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## Synopsis

At the age of 17, Ronit, the only child of the long-time widowed and highly revered Rav Krushka, left the insular Orthodox community of Hendon in the North End of London to attend college in New York City. Now, a successful financial analyst with a married lover, a therapist and an unconcealed estrangement from her religious upbringing, she returns to London upon hearing the news of her father's death. Despite her calculated efforts for a quick trip, Ronit finds herself embroiled in the aftermath of his death, including the tangled web of complicated relationships and communal politics she had left behind.

Ronit is met by her cousin, the timid and soft-spoken Dovid, her father's hand-selected heir to his synagogue post. The most stunning news, however, is that Dovid is married to Esti, Ronit's childhood best friend with whom she shared a brief, forbidden relationship. During her stay, often unsuccessfully navigating the treacherous terrain of this close-knit community, she rekindles the triangular relationship with her old friend and cousin.

Ronit's provocative comments and demeanor make her a scandalous threat to the conservative community elders who try to manipulate her into leaving before her father's memorial service. But she realizes that she can return to her life in New York only after she ties up a few loose ends. In doing so, she is able to reconcile with her friends and her faith on her own terms.

## Discussion Questions

**Leader's note:** This study guide includes many more questions than will be possible for an average-length book discussion. Decide in advance which ones you want to use, although be mindful that once begun, a book discussion often takes off in its own direction.

1. What are the themes of this book? They might include:

return  
reconciliation  
transformation  
redemption  
love  
the power of speech  
community

2. How does Alderman develop these (or other) themes?

[For example, on the theme of love Alderman wrote in an interview: "*This book is not about exposing the secret lives of lesbians in Hendon, it is about love—different kinds of love. The love between two friends, between a husband and wife, and between children and their parents.*"]

3. The novel contains an array of complicated relationships. The personalities of the characters do not remain constant, but reflect rather a variety of actions, moods, and speech; each interaction contingent upon the particular situation. With these shifting personalities in mind, how would you describe the following relationships?

Ronit *and*: Scott; her therapist; Rav Krushka; Dovid; Esti; Hinda Rochel; Dr. Hartog

Dovid *and*: Ronit; Esti; Rav Krushka; Dr. Hartog

Esti *and*: Ronit; Dovid; Rav Krushka; Dr. Hartog

4. The novel accentuates the often contradictory nature of Jewish life. Alderman introduces each chapter with a quote or statement from Jewish theology or ritual. Whether it is a *brakhab*, a rabbinic statement

from *Pirkei Avot* or a discussion of a biblical passage, the reader is presented with an *idealized* religious concept. The narrative then proceeds to describe the characters' behavior that is in tension with the ideal.

Example: Chapter 8: “*Rejoice and make joyful this precious couple, as You brought joy to Your creations in the Garden of Eden before the beginning*”. From the *Sheva Brachot*, sung at a wedding banquet. (p.127)

In the chapter, Dovid engages in the following exchange with his mother: (p.129)

“*She leaned forward and said to him: ‘Dovid, are you happy?’ ‘What?’ ‘With Esti. Are you and Esti happy?’ ‘Yes’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, I’m very tired now. I really would like to go to bed.’*”

5. What does this conversation suggest about tensions between the ideal and the real?

6. The novelist's critique of the Orthodox community is apparent in the following: (p.103)

Ronit: “It's this place, that's the problem. It's being here with all those little couples sitting in their identical houses producing identical children. It was seeing them in synagogue, all those women in their smart Shabbat suits and their perfectly matched hats and each woman appropriately paired to a man, preferably with a child tugging at each arm. They just fit together, the whole set—like Orthodox Jew Barbie: comes complete with Orthodox Ken, two small children, the house, the car, and a selection of kosher foodstuffs. They make you believe it, until it seems obvious that people come in matched pairs, and you don't think to look underneath and you give up wondering because it *all seems just so neat*.”

7. What is Alderman implying with this description? Do you think this is applicable to the Orthodox community, only, or can this be applied more universally to all organized Jewish communities? Is this a fair assessment?

8. Within the community of Hendon, it is widely accepted that the “*correct mode for a man is speech, while the correct mode for a woman is silence*.” As the narrative unfolds, characters' transformations can be seen through their speech; Esti becomes more assertive, and Ronit seems more accepting. Give examples of this, and other possible scenarios.

9. The effects of speech, both spoken and unspoken, are a powerful theme of the story. How is this reflected in the following situations?

**Words have the capability to soothe and inspire:** Ronit and her therapist; Rav Kruskha with everyone in the community *except* his daughter.

**Words hurt:** Ronit's father's silence only to his daughter alienates her (in this case, the *absence* of speech); tale bearing within the community is meant to besmirch Ronit and Esti.

**Speech provokes:** Ronit appalls the Shabbat dinner guests with her strident and fictitious account of a lesbian lover in New York; all of the conversations between Ronit and Dr. Hartog are confrontational.

**Words have the power of redemption:** Esti's moving statement to the community at the *hesped* frees her from years of repressed emotions; her speech solidifies her relationship with Dovid; it empowers Dovid in his dealing with the community; it enables Ronit to accept Dovid and Esti's relationship, and make peace with her past (perhaps) and future.

Can you think of other instances where speech drives the narrative?

10. There are both positive and negative attributes to belonging to a close-knit religious community. What are they, and do they play out in this novel?

11. When first studying under Rav Krushka, Dovid begins to experience blinding migraines accompanied by flashes of vivid color. Do you think, as the Rav did, that Dovid was receiving visions from God or was he just suffering from stress-induced headaches? What is the significance of the colors? Do you think the Rav was doing a service or a disservice to Dovid by offering this explanation?

12. The only possession Ronit wants from her father's house is a set of silver candlesticks she remembered from the Shabbat of her youth. What do these candlesticks represent and why are they so important to her?

13. What do you think was Ronit's true intention when standing behind Esti in the kitchen, giving her the gift of hydrangeas? Why do you think Ronit told the Hartogs and the Goldfarbs that she was a lesbian with a girlfriend back in New York?

14. What is the significance of the Bible story of David and Jonathan? What does it mean to Esti?

[*A number of modern Bible interpretations have understood David and Jonathon's relationship as a homosexual one.*]

15. Why do you think Ronit ignored Hartog's warning, disguised herself and attended the memorial service? Why doesn't she confront Hartog afterwards?

16. Esti and Dovid decide to stay together and have their baby. Do you think their marriage will be a happy one? Can you think of other examples of successful marriages that relied more on partnership than love?

17. Do you think Dovid will be a success as a rabbi? How will he be different from Rabbi Krushka?

18. What does the title, *Disobedience*, signify to us, the readers? The Webster Dictionary defines disobedience as "the refusal or neglect to obey." Is this an apt title?

19. Both obedience and free will are valued concepts within Judaism,

but most often they are contradictory. Should Ronit's behavior be understood as disobedience, or rather as an assertion of free will?

20. Which characters are sympathetic to you? Does your sense of this change over the course of the story? Can you imagine friendships with any of them? Which ones?

21. How is Ronit presented at the end? Is the conclusion realistic or satisfying?

Please let us know how your book review session went.

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### About the Author



**Naomi Alderman**, a graduate of Oxford University and the University of East Anglia's Creative Writing MA, has published award-winning short fiction. She received the Orange Award for New Writers in 2006 for *Disobedience* which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction that same year.

Alderman has worked as an editor and game designer, and spent several in New York City. She grew up in the Orthodox Jewish community in Hendon, where she lives today. Alderman has said of Hendon:

*The duality of Hendon has always fascinated me. I grew up here, went to an Orthodox Jewish primary school and a secular secondary school, learned how to move from one world to another smoothly, changing vocabulary and opinions as I went. In one context I say 'gevalt' and keep my support for gay marriage to myself; whereas in the other I say 'oh dear' and don't mention my views on Israel. Most Hendon residents find this constant flickering between states untroubling, even uninteresting. Not me. The liminality led me slowly to consider the big questions: how much am I a function of where I come from, or of where I happen to be? And if I am only a result of a set of influences, what am I?*

### **Leading the Discussion**

1. Begin by asking each member to comment.
2. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions.
3. If relevant discussion ensues, shift your agenda and let the group determine its direction.
4. Encourage conversation among the participants rather than with the leader.
5. Keep the discussion focused on the selected book. Each question should be answered before a new topic is introduced.
6. Refer to the text to support ideas when necessary.
7. Encourage diverse opinions and welcome participation from all members of the group.

*From Sisterhood By Design, Fall 2007, Illene Rubin, Books Chair*

### **Other Titles Selected for Orpah's List**

2005: The Singing Fire by Lilian Nattel

2006: Those Who Save Us, by Jenna Blum

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