

# International Day of Study

## Leader's Guide: Midrash

### BACKGROUND: WHAT IS *MIDRASH*?

Midrash is where scholarship, careful reading and imagination meet. On that rich and fertile field of possibility, *midrash* is the tool that has been used for millennia to uncover and fill the hidden or missing content of the biblical text. We look for spaces, gaps, unspoken responses and repeated words. Wherever there is an irregularity, an unanswered question, a redundancy, there you will find *midrash* waiting to respond, to suggest, sometimes to surprise or to challenge.

Why do we need an inventive approach to our holy texts? Why do we need this genre of rabbinic literature? The glorious reality of the Bible is that it tells us everything and at the same time tells us so very little. The text itself is profoundly terse. Biblical Hebrew contains less than 10,000 words (literate readers of English need about 40,000 words in their vocabulary), so there is limited linguistic nuance. A surprisingly large number of those words are categorized as *hapax legamenon*, meaning they are used once, and only once, in the biblical text, so that their meaning may be obscure and hard to pin down precisely. The Bible uses almost no adjectives and rarely explains why a character does what he or she does. The Bible is a text of action—nouns and verbs. We are told what people do but rarely why.

There is an additional issue to consider: *midrashists* work with the guiding principle that the text is the perfect and timeless word of God. So they are forced to draw understanding from it, in spite of the text's purposeful silences, gaps, redundancies, inconsistencies, or because of them. The terseness of our texts, on the one hand frustrating and mute, invites questions instead, and these questions lead to *midrashic* interpretation. Consider a few examples:

One of the most potent and disturbing accounts in the Bible, the nineteen lines of the *akedah*, (the account of the binding of Isaac, *Genesis 22:1-19*) is a text without a single adjective, and without one word exploring the explosive emotions of the situation. We want to know what Abraham is thinking as he lifts the knife<sup>1</sup>.

We want to know what Dinah, the voiceless victim of *Genesis 34:1-31*, thinks and feels after she is raped.

We ask how Rebecca could love one son so much more than another; how Rachel felt when her sister was in Jacob's bed; why Ruth follows Naomi instead of returning to her own people.

Midrash comes to rescue us, to validate our questions and suggest some answers. But first, come learn some of the history of this art form.

The word itself, *midrash*, is from the Hebrew root *d-r-sh*. All related Hebrew words with that root have something to do with digging, inquiring, searching, seeking, examining, investigating. As early as the period of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see this term used to describe a method of inquiry into the verses of the Bible. Later the Sages<sup>2</sup> adopt this approach to texts, perhaps by way of the Dead Sea sect or perhaps as a reaction to the influences of the Hellenistic world in which they lived. In any

case, the oldest surviving *midrashim* (plural of *midrash*) are from the middle of the Second Temple period and there is convincing evidence that they are a product of the Jewish community in the land of Israel and not Babylonia. The Babylonian academies were focused almost exclusively on learning Jewish law, *halakhah*, and spent little time developing the creative realm of *aggadah*. We will focus on *midrash aggadah* in this lesson, which concerns itself with that large category of non-legal questions.

From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. to the period of the Crusades, the land of Israel was at the center of cultural and religious conflicts. Struggles within the community, beginning with Hellenists and zealots, gave way to disagreements in the schools of Hillel and Shammai, followed by struggles with outside provocateurs — the Samaritans, Dead Sea sects, nascent Christianity and later Rome, Byzantium, and Islam. This was a fractious and fearful world for the Jews.

So what provoked this creative exploration of our texts? What historical or philosophical imperatives led us to agree to this technique of entering the text and prying it open rather than finding a single timely message and then sealing it shut? Jews were facing radical adjustments, foreign threats and cultural influences, intra-community strife, the loss of political independence, Christian polemic and religious freedom. Opening the door, the rabbis had already declared, in Talmud tractate *Sanhedrin 34a* that “one biblical statement may carry many meanings.” *Midrash aggadah*, with its creative interpretive stance, holds the key for discovering new relevance, as well as solace, from our storehouse of ancient texts.

### Classical *aggadic midrash* is divided into three periods:

**The Early Period** includes those *midrashim* collected during the *Amoraic* period (an *amora* was a rabbi of the Talmud), 400-600 C.E. These *midrashim* began as sermons of the synagogue and were written down primarily in Galilean Aramaic, the language of the Jerusalem Talmud. These *midrashim* often follow a formal structure, which begins with a proem, or line from another part of *Tanakh*, that weaves a connecting thread through the midrash, allowing it to play off other seemingly unrelated texts. This elegant literary homiletic (sermonic) device was a favorite of the period. Because it begins the lesson with a quote from a seemingly unrelated verse, ultimately connecting a string of verses to expound and clarify, it feels a bit daring. It seems to require a level of textual familiarity that attests to the skill of the *midrashist* but at the same time attests to a unity among all the works in the Bible as we watch one distant verse support and amplify another.

These collections generally have the word *Rabbah* in their title, which means “large collection.” (For example: *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Ruth Rabbah*.)

**The Middle Period** contains *midrashim* of the *Geonic* period (time of Babylonian rabbinic leadership), 640-1000 C.E. More of the *midrashim* in this period are not connected to a specific text, and there is an increase in the number of references to the Garden of Eden and hell, angels and demons, and other apocalyptic and mystical elements reflecting the preoccupations of medieval society. They are primarily written in Hebrew. (For example: *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, *Pesikta Rabbati*.)

**The Late Period** are those *midrashim* compiled from earlier works, 1200-1550 C.E.

The Sages created *midrashim* in the academy and study-house to elaborate on the narrative, to deal with thorny theological issues, to rectify seeming discrepancies or inconsistencies in the narrative itself, and to reconcile the sometimes troubling behavior of our biblical heroes with the laws of the land. That's a tall corrective order. Those from talmudic and rabbinic literature were often designed to serve a didactic function by reinterpreting, explicating, and elaborating biblical texts to derive relevant moral lessons. Every superfluous word was fair game for explication, any tool to excavate a text was useable. The most minute details or even long lists of place names and genealogies offer the opportunity for creative exegesis. Rabbinic creativity is nowhere more evident.

Classical *midrash aggadah* provides us with a window into the inventive minds of the rabbinic problem solvers, juicing the issues posed in the Biblical text to address contemporary situations, confront theological issues, and poke spiritual stagnation.

This approach to opening a text, rather than fixing and closing it, is what distinguishes *midrash aggadah* from *midrash halakhah*. This approach is also what beckons us to become *midrashists* ourselves. Unlike the search for an explanation that asks us to converge on a single answer, *midrash* asks us to diverge, to exercise our creative muscle to make meaning for ourselves here and now.

Over time, the rabbis have used *midrash* to draw out and examine the women in our holy texts, using *midrash* sometimes to condemn and sometimes to rescue. Some of our biblical women are nameless, others voiceless, and so *midrash* has been used to hear them speak, to give them motives, to explain cruel fates. *Midrash* can also propel a specific political or legal agenda, and it is with that in mind that the accompanying lesson on *midrash* in *Megillat Ruth* has been designed.

The *midrashim* of Ruth are meant to provoke as well as amuse, selected to reinforce the ways in which *midrash aggadah* has been used by the sages both to corral and expand the text. But they are especially meant to open the conversation for new voices in the room, which is the very heart of the endeavor of *midrash*.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>*Maachelet*, the word we translate as “knife”, is actually a *hapax legamenon* in the Torah. One other time in Tanakh we see the word, in the Book of Judges, 19:29, used to name the instrument the Levite used to dismember his concubine into twelve pieces. If this intrigues you, then you are on your way to writing *midrash* yourself.

<sup>2</sup>The Sages, sometimes referred to as *HaZaL* (an acronym for *Hachachmeynu Zikram Li-v'racha*—our sages, may their memory be a blessing) refers to a group of several hundred or a few thousand Torah sages who lived primarily in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia between approximately the 1st and 7th centuries CE. Over the course of six hundred years, these rabbis established the written law of the Mishna and Talmud, set the liturgy of the prayerbook, composed liturgical poetry, translated the Bible into Aramaic and also contributed to *midrash*.

# Introduction

## OBJECTIVES

1. Participants will study several classical *midrashim* written for the biblical text of *Ruth*.
2. Participants will become aware of the various functions of the *midrashic* technique as they are employed to resolve difficulties in the biblical text.
3. Participants will be able to engage in a more nuanced, more developed appreciation of the story of *Ruth* through the elaboration of *midrash*.

**Leader:** *In the next 45 minutes, we'll have the chance to look at 2 or 3 midrashim about Ruth. The midrashim we will study are all classic midrashim found in the 6<sup>th</sup> century collection called Ruth Rabbah. We want to ask what exactly prompts a rabbinic midrash, how and why these issues interest the rabbis, how the rabbis solve the problems that the texts bring, and think about how they interest us, and why.*

Leader explains that *midrash* serves many didactic purposes. *Midrash* is not looking for one answer to a textual difficulty. Rather it is a tool that opens, not closes, the possibilities for interpretation. It fulfills a number of functions, among them:

- It aims sometimes to connect ideas that are seemingly unrelated.
- It aims sometimes to legitimate the harsh fates of seemingly blameless people.
- It aims sometimes to fill in the conversational gaps in terse exchanges.
- It aims sometimes to bring the text in line with rabbinic teachings or silences.
- It aims sometimes to reinforce God's providence.

## Midrash I

**Leader:** *In Ruth Rabbah, there are midrashim that fall into each of the above categories. In the first midrash we'll look at, the rabbis want to figure out why Elimelech dies early in the story, though his death seems to be a simple plot device. By pausing here, we also get to join the rabbis in seeing God's hand at work in the story.*

**Leader:** *Notice a couple of things before we go too much further.*

- The historical and political setting of this book, when the judges ruled, is ancient history's version of "The Wild West" with sheriffs doling out local justice. Lasting from around 1200 to 1000 B.C.E. the situation was difficult—the land of Israel was filled with potential military enemies, and there was no centralized Jewish leadership. Judges or chieftains would spring up to lead during times of crisis, followed by a general return to lax moral behavior. Jews were still relying on idols, being punished by God, crying out for help, then redeemed by a local hero, a judge.
- Famine was a way of life in the ancient world, and people moving because of drought and famine is a frequent theme in the Bible. There are even *midrashim* on famine. According to *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4, there are ten famines—in the days of Adam, Lemech, Abraham, Isaac,

Jacob, Elijah, Elisha, David, the book of Judges, and one yet to come upon the world. With a beautiful echo from the prophet Amos, the *midrash* tells us that the final famine will not be a famine of food but of spiritual nourishment. “*That I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.* (Amos 7:2). Here’s a taste of the poetry of *midrash* and the weaving together of texts that echo each other. But back to Ruth. Famine, in its real or metaphoric sense, is the situation as the book opens.

- Moab is an unlikely place for an Israelite to go in time of famine. The Moabites are known for their stinginess and unwillingness to share, and according to *Deuteronomy* 23:4-7, Moabites are singled out for exclusion followed by an unambiguous conclusion: “*You shall never concern yourself with their [the Moabites] welfare or benefit as long as you live.*” (23:7) *Ruth* opens with an Israelite voluntarily moving to Moab. We need to prepare ourselves for some surprises and reversals; that’s what the first line says.

- In literature, these few verses are called the opening or exposition and we might want to hurry past them to the story itself. But the rabbis pause here and tarry.

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#### *Ruth 1:1-5*

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and **a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went** to reside in the country of Moab with his wife and two sons, and the name of the man was Elimelech, his wife’s name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephraites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. 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.

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**Leader:** *The rabbis want to know the answer to a question that doesn’t seem on the surface to make any difference; they ask why Elimelech dies. The following midrash, from Ruth Rabbah, comes to answer their question. The midrash begins by looking back at one line (in bold) from the biblical text itself and expanding.*

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#### **Ruth Rabbah 1:4**

**And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went ...and the name of the man was Elimelech.** (*Ruth 1:1-2*) Why was Elimelech punished? Because he caused the hearts of Israel to fall [into despair]. Elimelech may be compared to a magnate who lived in a certain province. The people of that province, depending on him, used to say, “Should years of drought come, he could supply the entire province with food for ten years.” However, when a year of drought did come, his maidservant went walking about the marketplace with her [empty] basket in her hand. The people of the province said, “He on whom we depended in the event of a drought

to feed the entire province for ten years, look! There in the marketplace stands his maidservant, basket in hand, empty!" So with Elimelech. He was one of the notables of the realm, one of the sustainers of the generation. Still, when the years of famine came, he said to himself: Now all of Israel will come knocking at my door [begging for food], one with a large basket, another with a small. So he got up and ran away from them.

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**Leader:** *We only meet Elimelech for a moment at the beginning of the story, yet the rabbis go right to the heart of an unanswerable question and ask what prompts his death. And surprisingly, they decide that Elimelech's death is justified by his behavior.*

Considering that we've just met him, how can we possibly draw any conclusions about his behavior?

What reasons does the *midrash* offer?

It contends that Elimelech leaves for Israel and goes to Moab, not because of the famine, not because he himself is seeking food, but because he is too selfish to share what he has with his neighbors. He does not want to give what he has to those who are starving.

*This is a provocative leap.* What text support do the rabbis give for this harsh judgment of a man they hardly know? Follow along as we watch the rabbis read volumes into a few clues.

**Points to notice:**

Names are often keys to personalities, especially in biblical books that are as allegorical as this one. Hebrew roots are especially important to note.

- Elimelech is not a humble name; it contains the word for king (*melech*). One midrash tells us that he used to go around saying "To me shall kingship come." (*Ruth Rabbah* 1:1-2) So humility was not one of his characteristics.
- Naomi means "my comfort"—implying sweetness. You might note that when she returns to Bethlehem the people surround her asking, "Is this Naomi?" She answers, "Do not call me Naomi, call me *Marah*...." *Marah* means "bitter", what she had now become.
- The *midrash* goes so far as to note that Mahlon and Chilion, the names of the dead sons, contain roots for "blotted out" (*nimmah*) and "perished" (*kalah*).
- Orpah "turned her back" (*oref*) on her mother-in-law and Ruth "saw" (*ra-atah*) the truth.
- The rabbis hear a pun on the place from which Elimelech flees, Bethlehem. The name of this city means "House of Bread." He could have fed people in "a house of bread" but he was too stingy to help others. Here Rashi comments that Elimelech was in fact a rich man, but he left because of his "narrowness of eye," his unwillingness to see beyond his own needs.

The rabbis glean support from the language of the text.

- We see in the phrase in verse 1 "and a man went" (*va-yaylech eesh*) a singular noun and a singular verb. Even though he left with his family, they are listed separately, a grammatical

appendage. The rabbis suggest this shows that he was concerned about himself first, and perhaps, therefore, himself only.

●Ephraites, according to *Ruth Rabbah* 2:5, means someone important, a courtier, aristocrat, a palace dweller. In *Ruth Rabbah* 2:9, both Orpah and Ruth were reputedly the daughters of Eglon, king of Moab, so were worthy to marry “royalty” like Chilion and Machlon. In any case, we have several clues that may lead us to conclude that not only Elimelech but his sons as well died because of their sins.

### Discussion Questions:

- Do you think it is important that we know why Elimelech dies?
- Does knowing this midrash change your understanding of the rest of the book of Ruth?
- Can you tell this story differently using the same clues?

### SUMMATION

In an allegorical story like the book of *Ruth* that is used to trace and justify David’s lineage, one theme is unexpected kindness and generosity. The rabbis pause early in the text to sketch out the minor characters to allow us a glimpse at the grander themes of reversal and destiny. After all, we will see the cursed of Israel, the Moabite, become the heroine and the great-grandmother of the dynasty. That is no small reversal—the wealthy end up dead, the “living dead” end up as the progenitors. The empty shells that are Ruth and Naomi when they leave Moab are a result of the famine of the spirit as well as the body.

So the rabbis want to be clear that Elimelech’s is no random death of a blameless man; rather Elimelech’s demise, easy to overlook except as a plot device, serves narrative, thematic and instructive purposes in the hands of *midrashists*. Elimelech, from their point of view, becomes the uncharitable man of narrow vision who flees—from the spiritual as well as the physical land. Ruth returns to that same place, now her spiritual home and land. That barren place that Elimelech flees in verse 1 becomes, for Ruth, fertile ground.

## Midrash 2

**Leader:** *This next midrash takes us to the heart of the book, in many ways its center.*

*Perhaps the most famous lines in the Book of Ruth is Ruth's affirmation of her decision to leave her home and return with Naomi to a place she does not know.*

**Discussion Question:** *What does Ruth have to lose by leaving? What does she have to gain by going?*

Some possible answers:

- It would seem that Ruth has little to gain. She is from a despised people, the Moabites. Historically, the Moabites had shown indifference and hostility to Israel when they were on their trek to the Promised land, so in *Deuteronomy 23:5*, we read “No Ammonite of Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt and because he [Balak, king of Moab] hired Balaam...to curse you.” That’s pretty strong anti-Moabite sentiment.
- Ruth has never been there and Naomi seems a thin reed to cling to. Naomi, herself absent 10 years, old and sorrow-filled, is returning with nothing, no husband or children. In the ancient world, husbands and sons provide economic and social protection. Two women alone are highly vulnerable.
- Naomi doesn’t seem to want Ruth to come and tries to dissuade her in no uncertain terms. Three times (1:8-14) she argues that Ruth will have no prospects of children and security if she returns with her.
- The text hints at what she may have to gain. The word “return” (*lashuv*) is used repeatedly, twelve times in the first chapter alone. This word is the root in Hebrew of the concept of repentance (*teshuvah*).
- Ruth is the mirror image of Elimelech, who the previous *midrash* sees as leaving to assure himself more security and advantage, to relieve himself of obligations to those in need. Ruth returns to an unknown and possibly hostile place to assume unrequired obligations for one in need. She seems desperate to unburden herself of who she was, even if it means not knowing who she will become. Or perhaps Ruth knows exactly who she is, with an assurance that defies risk and uncertainty. As Naomi looks back, and that is what “return” means to her, Ruth looks ahead; she sees “return” as what will move her forward. We will see that in the midrash that follows, Ruth alone will use the future tense.

**Leader:** *The rabbis see Ruth as the quintessential convert. She makes a decision that seems to have no benefit to her; she is firm in it, though Naomi discourages her and Orpah three times (v. 1:8, 1:11, and 1:12) with arguments that convince Orpah to return to her family. (The rabbis take the model of discouraging a convert three times from these verses.) Ruth stands firm in her decision, draws Naomi to her (*daroka-ba*, means “clings to her”), and affirms:*

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**Do not entreat me to leave you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. So may the Lord do to me and so may He continue, if anything but death separates me and you. (1:16-17)**

**Leader:** *Let's look at Ruth's reply and see midrashic invention at its finest. What appears to be a declaration of Ruth's resolve is, in the hands of this creative midrash one part of a conversation between Ruth and Naomi.*

This *midrash* on these famous lines constructs a conversation in which Ruth's half of the dialogue responds to Naomi's continuing protestations. In Naomi's part of the conversation, she continues to dissuade Ruth, apprising her of how radically her life will change. In Ruth's replies, we see her resolve, her affirmation, and her determination. This dialogue becomes a conversion text, a model for giving instruction in the rigors and restrictions that await the convert.

[Ask two volunteers to read the *midrash* as a conversation. Ruth's part begins with the bolded line [from the biblical text]: "Entreat me not to leave you and to return from following after you," and continues with the *midrash* (in italics) I am fully resolved..."

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**Ruth Rabbah 2:22, Yalkut, Ruth 601**

**And Ruth said: Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you. (1:16).**

What is the meaning of "entreat me not"? She [Ruth] said, "Do not sin against me; do not turn your misfortunes away from me." (i.e., don't seek to turn me away by telling me of all your misfortunes).

**To leave you and return from following after you.**

[Ruth]: *I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it [learning the laws of conversion] should be at your hands than at those of another.*

When Naomi heard this she began to unfold the laws of conversion, saying: My daughter, it is not the way of Jewish women to frequent theaters and circuses.

*Ruth:* Wherever you go I will go.

*Naomi:* My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house without a mezuzah.

*Ruth:* Wherever you lodge I will lodge.

*Naomi:* These are the penalties for transgressions; you will have to give up idolatry.

*Ruth:* Your people will be my people.

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A variation and continuation from Rashi in **BTalmud, Yevamot 47b**

*Naomi:* We may not go out of the boundary of 2000 cubits.

*Ruth:* Wherever you go I will go

*Naomi:* We are prohibited to allow a female to be secluded with a male who is not her husband.

*Ruth:* Wherever you lodge I will lodge.

*Naomi:* Our people is separated from other people with 613 commandments.

*Ruth:* Your people shall be my people.

*Naomi:* Idolatry is forbidden to us.

*Ruth:* Your God will be my God.

*Naomi:* Four types of death penalties were delegated to the *beit din* to punish transgressors.

*Ruth:* Wherever you die I will die.

*Naomi:* Two burial plots were delegated to the *beit din* to bury those executed, one for those stoned and one for those burned, one for those decapitated and one for those strangled.

*Ruth:* And there I will be buried.

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**Leader:** *What do you notice about Naomi's instructions? About Ruth's responses?*

Points to remember:

- Naomi paints a picture of limitations and losses, prohibition and separations. She is clear that Ruth's world will narrow, not expand, her opportunities shrink, not grow. Her commitment will not end, literally, until she dies.
- Ruth on the other hand speaks uncharacteristically in the future tense, in the affirmative. She accepts and recognizes everything Naomi says but gleans from it a future of affirmation.

**Leader:** *Can you come up with other questions that these responses might also answer?*

**Leader:** *For those of you who have converted (or have personal knowledge of the conversionary process), what part of this story speaks to you and your experience?*

## SUMMATION

Is there an underlying political or social agenda of the rabbis in this *midrashic* view of Ruth?

- Ruth is the ancestor of King David. Tradition tells us that Samuel the Prophet wrote this account of David's lineage to silence the critics in David's court who saw his bloodline as polluted by Moabite blood. Moab, one of the great enemies of Israel, descends from the incest union of Lot and his daughters after the destruction of Sodom. This perverse beginning yields a people who are known in the Bible for their selfishness (*Deuteronomy 23*). This presents problems of lineage—how can the King of Israel descend from Moab? *Megillat Ruth* answers the charge by creating an ideal Jew-by-choice who embodies all of the values and behaviors most dear to Jewish teachings.
- As you learned in the first lesson on the scroll itself, some date the book of *Ruth* from the time of the Babylonian exile. Here the function of the midrash is contemporary for the period. Conversion is an issue at any time of exile for the Jews, so this midrash, indeed the central theme of the book, legitimates conversion. If Ruth, a woman alone from a despised nation, can become a Jew and the ancestor of the royal line, then certainly the guide for acceptance as a Jew-of-choice must be sincerity, loyalty, and adherence to the tenets of the religion.

## Midrash 3

**Leader:** *Can you think of any other women who use their sexuality to conceive children when events in their lives would otherwise keep them childless?*

Of course, barrenness and God's intervention is a theme that runs throughout the Bible, beginning with Sarah and including Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah. There are other women who deal with difficult society-imposed restrictions to bearing children. They must resort to manipulating social norms, and the men around them, to become pregnant.

Tamar in *Genesis 38* is one example; Ruth is another. This next *midrash* looks at Ruth and Tamar together and considers ways in which their plights and their solutions are similar.

**Leader:** *Why might the rabbis be interested in connecting Tamar, so many generations earlier, and Ruth in a midrash?* [Recall that they are all connected by lineage since Judah and Tamar's son Oved is an early ancestor of Boaz.]

This *midrash* accomplishes the following:

- It ties together Ruth and Boaz (and ultimately David) with their distant ancestors, Judah and Tamar.
- It answers questions about the propriety of women like Ruth and Tamar, who live well outside the boundaries of social norms in their determination to have a child.
- It confronts the issue of God's hand in events that seem driven by human, not divine, choice.
- This *midrash* comments on *Genesis 38:19* and weaves several texts together for the purpose of retrieving both Ruth and Tamar.
- It acknowledges the Divine hand and in their selection as matriarchs to the line of David.

Before reading the *midrash*, recall the story of Tamar and her seduction of her father-in-law, Judah. [Review *Genesis 38* with the group.]

**Question for discussion:** *How would you compare the behavior of these two women?*

Possible answers:

- Both lost their first husbands and were left childless.
- Both were determined to find new husbands.
- Both selected men who were relatives of their dead husbands.

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**Soncino Zohar, Bereshith, Section 1, p.188a**

**And she put off from her the garments of her widowhood.** (*Genesis 38:19*) Tamar was the daughter of a priest, and it can hardly be imagined that she set out with the intention of committing incest with her father-in-law, since she was by nature chaste and modest. She was indeed virtuous and did not prostitute herself and it was out of her

deeper knowledge and wisdom that she approached Judah, and a desire to act kindly and faithfully (towards the dead) and it was because her act was based on a deeper knowledge that God aided her and she straightaway conceived. So it was all ordained from on High.

If it is asked why did not God cause those sons to be born from some other woman, the answer is that Tamar was necessary for His purpose, and not any other woman. There were two women from whom the seed of Judah was to be built up, from whom were to descend King David, King Solomon, and the Messiah—Tamar and Ruth.

These two women had much in common. Both lost their first husbands and both took similar steps to replace them. Tamar enticed Judah because he was the next-of-kin to her sons who had died “and she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she was not given unto him for wife.” Ruth similarly enticed Boaz, as it says, “and she uncovered his feet and laid her down” (*Ruth* 3:7) and afterwards she bore him Obed. Now we do not ask why Obed was not born from another woman, for assuredly Ruth was necessary for that purpose to the exclusion of the verse “wherefore I praise the dead that are already dead (*Ecclesiastes* 4:2), for while their husbands were alive there was no merit in them, but afterwards they were good for something, and so these two women exerted themselves to do kindness and truth with the dead, and God aided them in that work, and all was done fittingly.

Happy is he who exerts himself in the study of the Torah day and night, as it says: “but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein, for then thou shalt make thy ways prosperous. (*Joshua* 1:8)

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This *midrash* declares that two women were selected by design, by God, not by chance, “from whom the seed of Judah was to be built up, from whom were to descend King David, King Solomon, and the Messiah...” and they are Tamar and Ruth. And then the *midrash* sets about to compare the two women.

**The *midrash* tells us:**

- Both lost their first husbands.
- Both took similar steps to replace them.
- Tamar enticed Judah because he was next-of-kin to her husbands, Ruth enticed Boaz because he was next-of-kin.
- It says (we could read as humor) that “while their first husbands were alive there was no merit in them, but afterwards they were good for something. So these two women exerted

themselves to do kindness and truth with the dead, and God aided them in that work and all was done fittingly.” (Those first husbands were worth more dead than alive—at least to the Davidic line. After all, their deaths precipitated their widows’ determination to carry on their line, with Judah and Boaz.)

- The more important link: the liaison of Tamar and Judah results, ten generations later, in the birth of Boaz. Boaz and Ruth are the ancestors of the Davidic dynasty and ultimately the messiah. Here we see a strong declaration that God’s hand is in these matters, that both Tamar and Ruth were meant for their roles and their unseemly “taking matters into their own hands” was divinely guided.

**Leader:** *So this midrash comes to rescue the reputation of these determined women, declare that “we do not ask why Obed was not born from another woman because for assuredly Ruth was necessary for that purpose to the exclusion of any other woman.” There is no happenstance in either the selection or the actions of these women.*

**Discussion Question:** *Can you suggest why the rabbis are so concerned about Tamar and Ruth’s reputations that they rescue them from criticism? In what ways does this midrash speak to the issues of women in the ancient world? How about in our world?*

## SUMMATION

Classical *midrash* is filled with invention, wit, and sophistication, often laden with a political or social agenda as well. But in this lesson, we have not spoke about modern interpretive *midrash*.

Modern *midrash* can continue to revive the story of Ruth. This story of reversals, of drought to rebirth, of the despised becoming the chosen, of grief giving way to joy are themes that can come alive in composing our own *midrashim* for our own time and sensibilities. Find a place in this text that needs some inventive literary grout, and then, get to work.

# TEXT FOR PARTICIPANTS

## MIDRASH 1

### *Ruth 1: 1-5*

1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to reside in the country of Moab with his wife and two sons. 2. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephraimites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. 3. Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. 5. Then those two, Mahlon and Chilion, also died. So the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband.

### *Ruth Rabbah 1:4*

**And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went ...**and the name of the man was Elimelech” (*Ruth 1:1-2*) Why was Elimelech punished? Because he caused the hearts of Israel to fall [into despair]. Elimelech may be compared to a magnate who lived in a certain province. The people of that province, depending on him, used to say, “Should years of drought come, he could supply the entire province with food for ten years.” However, when a year of drought did come, his maidservant went walking about the marketplace with her [empty] basket in her hand. The people of the province said, “He on whom we depended in the event of a drought to feed the entire province for 10 years, look! There in the marketplace stands his maidservant, basket in hand, empty!” So with Elimelech. He was one of the notables of the realm, one of the sustainers of the generation. Still, when the years of famine came, he said to himself: Now all of Israel will come knocking at my door [begging for food], one with a large basket, another with a small. So he got up and ran away from them.

## MIDRASH 2

### *Ruth Rabbah 2:22, Yalkut, Ruth 601*

**And Ruth said: Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you (1:16).**

What is the meaning of “entreat me not”? She [Ruth] said, “Do not sin against me; do not turn your misfortunes away from me.” (i.e., don't seek to turn me away by telling me of all your misfortunes).

**To leave you and return from following after you.**

[*Ruth*]: I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it [learning the laws of conversion] should be at your hands than at those of another.

When Naomi heard this she began to unfold the laws of conversion, saying:

*Naomi*: My daughter, it is not the way of Jewish women to frequent theaters and circuses.

*Ruth*: Wherever you go I will go

*Naomi*: My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house without a mezuzah.

*Ruth*: Wherever you lodge I will lodge.

*Naomi*: These are the penalties for transgressions; you will have to give up idolatry.

*Ruth*: Your people will be my people.

## A VARIATION AND CONTINUATION

*from Rashi in Talmud, Yevamot 47b*

*Naomi:* We may not go out of the boundary of 2000 cubits.

*Ruth:* Wherever you go I will go.

*Naomi:* We are prohibited to allow a female to be secluded with a male who is not her husband.

*Ruth:* Wherever you lodge I will lodge.

*Naomi:* Our people is separated from other people with 613 commandments.

*Ruth:* Your people shall be my people.

*Naomi:* Idolatry is forbidden to us.

*Ruth:* Your God will be my God.

*Naomi:* Four types of death penalties were delegated to the *beit din* to punish transgressors.

*Ruth:* Wherever you die I will die.

*Naomi:* Two burial plots were delegated to the *beit din* to bury those executed, one for those stoned and one for those burned, one for those decapitated and one for those strangled.

*Ruth:* And there I will be buried.

## MIDRASH 3

*Soncino Soncino Zohar, Bereshith, Section 1, p.188a*

**And she put off from her the garments of her widowhood** (*Genesis*. 38:19) Tamar was the daughter of a priest, and it can hardly be imagined that she set out with the intention of committing incest with her father-in-law, since she was by nature chaste and modest. She was indeed virtuous and did not prostitute herself and it was out of her deeper knowledge and wisdom that she approached Judah, and a desire to act kindly and faithfully (towards the dead) and it was because her act was based on a deeper knowledge that God aided her and she straightaway conceived. So it was all ordained from on high.

If it is asked why did not God cause those sons to be born from some other woman, the answer is that Tamar was necessary for His purpose, and not any other woman. There were two women from whom the seed of Judah was to be built up, from whom were to descend King David, King Solomon, and the Messiah—Tamar and Ruth. These two women had much in common. Both lost their first husbands and both took similar steps to replace them. Tamar enticed Judah because he was the next-of-kin to her sons who had died “and she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she was not given unto him for wife.” Ruth similarly enticed Boaz, as it says, “and she uncovered his feet and laid her down” (*Ruth* 3:7) and afterwards she bore him Obed. Now we do not ask why Obed was not born from another woman, for assuredly Ruth was necessary for that purpose to the exclusion of the verse “wherefore I praise the dead that are already dead (*Ecclesiastes* 4:2), for while their husbands were alive there was no merit in them, but afterwards they were good for something, and so these two women exerted themselves to do kindness and truth with the dead, and God aided them in that work, and all was done fittingly. Happy is he who exerts himself in the study of the Torah day and night, as it says: “but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein, for then thou shalt make thy ways prosperous. (*Joshua* 1:8)