



 AlephBeta Presents

SHAVUOT

DOES THE BOOK OF RUTH MATTER?



SHAVUOT: DOES THE BOOK OF RUTH MATTER?

HOLIDAY GUIDE

About This Guide: A Message From Aleph Beta

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Shavuot Study Guide! We invite you to begin this journey tonight with the Book of Ruth, but we will not be *staying* there - we will be traveling through the excitement of Sinai and through many other incredible stories and chapters in the Bible. It is our hope that this guide will challenge you to ask important questions, and will lead you to new and exciting answers.

Because this is a guide to the text of the Book of Ruth, we will frequently invite you to read passages from the text and to engage with them. You can bring your favorite Tanakh (Bible) to the table, or you can print out our [Source Sheet](#), where we've reproduced the full text of Ruth.

One final note: this guide is full of discussion topics, questions to consider, passages to analyze, and thoughts to ponder. It was designed for careful thought and reflection at each "Ponder this" or "Look inside" section. Some reflection should take you a minute to consider, and others will lead to more exciting and engaged discussion. Resist the urge to rush through; take the time to think and discuss. Feel free to wander from this guide and spend more or less time at any of our destinations. This adventure is your own.



Is this guide for self-study, or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevuta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.



Is this guide for learning on Shavuot night, or should I study it in advance as holiday "prep"?

Again, either works! You might want to use this guide as a way to prepare for the holiday in advance -- but you can also open it up on Shavuot night, sight unseen, and spend the night delving into its mysteries.

About The Author

The material presented in this Guide was developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman and is presented in his 5-part video series: "Shavuot: Does the Book of Ruth Matter?" (available for viewing at www.alephbeta.org). The Guide was written by Immanuel Shalev, edited by Rivky Stern and Beth Lesch, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

Rabbi David Fohrman is the founder and CEO of Aleph Beta and scholar for the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Study. He lectures internationally on Biblical themes. Rabbi Fohrman currently resides in Woodmere, NY with his wife and children, where he also serves as resident scholar at the Young Israel of Woodmere.

Rabbi Fohrman is the author of *The Beast that Crouches at the Door*, *The Queen You Thought You Knew*, and *The Exodus You Almost Passed Over*. He served as a senior writer and editor for ArtScroll's Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud, and taught Biblical themes at The Johns Hopkins University. Rabbi Fohrman's recorded lectures and animated videos are available at www.alephbeta.org.



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What Are We Celebrating Anyway?



PONDER THIS

Before we dive into the Book of Ruth, ask yourself: What is the holiday of Shavuot all about? Why do we celebrate it? What are we commemorating? What should one do, think and feel to get in touch with the essence of this holiday?



Hint: “Because God commanded us to” is not exactly the answer that we’re looking for here...

Not too difficult, right? Shavuot is *chag matan torateinu* – the holiday of the giving of our Torah. That’s what we’re commemorating: the giving of the Ten Commandments and the mass revelation at Sinai.

Wow. A mass revelation at Sinai? Sounds pretty grand. Next to a holiday like Shavuot, where we celebrate an actual communion between man and God, it sounds like all the other holidays pale in comparison! Sukkot, Chanukah, Purim, even Passover with its plagues and wonders aren’t exactly on the level of talking to God.

A Fitting Book

So...Why do we read the Book of Ruth on this day?



PONDER THIS

We’ll review the actual text in just a moment, but before we do, ask yourself: Why do we read Ruth on Shavuot? Isn’t Ruth kind of pedestrian? A day in the life of Beit Lechem?

Here are some of the classic reasons that are given for why we read Ruth on Shavuot:

- 1 Shavuot is at the harvest, and Ruth is a story of harvest
- 2 Shavuot is the anniversary of the passing of King David, the great grandson of Ruth¹



PONDER THIS

Do you find these answers compelling? We’re not suggesting they’re wrong, per se, but, at first blush, they don’t seem like very exciting answers, do they?

¹ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Chagigah 12a

If we read the story of Ruth because Shavuot happens at the harvest, and so does the story of Ruth, why don't we read any interesting books about planting on Passover? Or gathering on Shavuot?

And if Shavuot is the anniversary of the passing of King David, great-grandson of Ruth, then why not read some stories about David? We have books written *by* him, like Psalms, or *about* him, like Samuel – why a story about his great-grandmother?



LOOK INSIDE: The Book of Ruth

Now might be a good time to read through the Book of Ruth, in Hebrew, if you can, or in English. A quick read should suffice. The main idea here is to get the whole story into your head.

Keep track of some of the questions that pop out at you, and if you've got a study partner, don't be afraid to ask all of your great questions aloud. Dazzle them with your inquisitiveness your insightful reading skills. While you read:

- ▶ Look for the elements of narrative structure (fancy term for the different puzzle pieces of a story)
 - ▶ Exposition – which verses tell us the personality of our characters, and the background and setting of the narrative?
 - ▶ Climax – what is the major conflict at the heart of the story that makes us care about it? When does it all come to a head and demand to be resolved?
 - ▶ Resolution – how is the major conflict resolved? Who resolves it and how?
- ▶ Ask yourselves: “Where have I heard this before?” What themes or words remind you of stories elsewhere in the Bible?

Compiling Questions

Welcome back! Pretty strange story, right? Here are a few of the questions that we came up with, let's compare notes:

1

Machlon means sickness. Kilyon means destruction...what kind of names are those for Elimelech's children? "Come here, little sickness!" "Come here, little destruction!"

2

The book really *does* seem pedestrian. There are no fun miracles, no battles or even divine calls for repentance. It's literally a rags to riches tale, with some interesting seduction going on, a marriage, and a genealogy that leads to King David.

3

Another one of the classical answers for why we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot, that we conveniently left out above, is that we read Ruth because of the inspiring conversion that Ruth undergoes. On this holiday where we turn to Torah, the mission statement of our people, we reflect on its value by reading about Ruth, who wasn't born into our people, but perceived the tremendous value of our mission, and chose to abandon her family and society for the chance to be a part of it.

The problem with that approach is that if we think about exposition, climax and resolution – Ruth's conversion should belong in the resolution, or at least in the climax, right? Couldn't we put together a better story about an inspiring conversion? Let's hear about how Ruth was raised as a Moabite princess, how great her life was, thousands of courtiers, dining at the palace, and then Machlon, budding Torah scholar, catches her eye. They meet, he tells her an inspiring d'var Torah, she falls head over heels, they get married. Machlon tragically passes away, and her only connection to Torah is her mother-in-law, of all people. The part where Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to abandon her – that's the climax – Orpah gracefully jumps ship, and Ruth, in the resolution, gives her beautiful speech about loyalty and faithfulness. In the epilogue, we hear about how she ends up with Boaz, and that she is the great-grandmother of King David.

But that's not the story we read! Ruth's inspiring speech is chapter 1 – the exposition! Then there's this strange story about kinsmen, marriage and responsibility that we read about for the next 3 chapters.

4

So maybe the climax is when Ruth lays at Boaz's feet and propositions marriage to him – surely, her financial problems will be totally resolved if he only says yes! Pretty impressive for a woman 3,000 years ago to propose marriage to a man, but Ruth was just that kind of woman. And wouldn't you know it, Boaz the progressive – he says yes! Mazal tov! And they had a grandkid named David. Wait, what? That's not what happens next? Who is this Ploni Almoni (what is with the names in this book?), and why must we hear about Boaz's negotiations with him and the public pronouncements in front of the elders? Exposition, climax, resolution – it seems like some other story is afoot... (Chalitzah pun!)

5

Indeed, as we mentioned above, this story is very much *not* about King David. He makes it into the very last verse – a teeny tiny epilogue. It can hardly be argued we read the Book of Ruth only because of David's special connection to the holiday of Shavuot.

6

Last of all – Ruth is classically described as a very great woman. I mean, she's King David's great-grandmother, after all. So...what's the deal with her sneaking into Boaz's bed at night? Shall we just gloss over that little episode? What is the meaning behind the late-night seduction of Ruth?

Take a few minutes to review your questions and the ones we raised above. Feel free to do a quick re-read to see if your views changed about the basic plot points of this story. *What is this book truly about?*

Tonight, we'll uncover some mind-blowing connections, and some incredible pieces of a puzzle that we'll leave to you to assemble.

Hearing Echoes



PONDER THIS

While you were reading, we asked you to consider the question of "Where we have heard all this before?" More specifically: What famous person in the Bible does Ruth remind you of?



Hint: He wasn't born into the people – he adopts its mission later in life.



Hint #2: Kindness is one of his central character traits.



Hint #3: Does **Ruth 2:11** remind you of anything?

Ruth 2:11

11 And Boaz replied and said to her, "It has been told to me all that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death, and you left your father and your mother and your native land, and you went to a people that you did not know before.

רות ב:יא

יֵא וַיַּעַן בֹּעַז, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ--הִגֵּד הִגֵּד לִי כָל אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂית אֶת-חֲמוּתְךָ, אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אִישִׁי; וַתַּעֲזְבִי אָבִיךָ וְאִמְךָ, וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלָדְתְּךָ, וַתֵּלְכִי, אֶל-עַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתָּ תְּמוּל שְׁלֹשׁוֹם.

Don't turn the page until you've given it some thought...

How about Abraham?

Genesis 12:1

1 And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

בראשית יב:א

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוֹה אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה.

That's right – Ruth and Abraham sure have a lot in common. Abraham is the first convert to Judaism, and leaves family, friends, and birthplace behind to fulfill a divine destiny. There are even language parallels to that effect.

Abraham and Ruth are also both known for their kindness:

Ruth's Kindness

Boaz mentions to Ruth when he first meets her that he heard of the kindness she did for her mother-in-law, to go with her to the land of Israel.² And he mentions that it was a great kindness for her to marry him, instead of the many others she could have married.³

Abraham's Kindness

Abraham has one of the longest kindness narratives in the Bible, where he entertains surprise guests.⁴ He is the forefather most associated with the trait of kindness.

Understanding the Parallels



LOOK INSIDE: God's Promise

What do you make of these parallels – and do they help us understand why we read this book on Shavuot?

And, consider the following promise that God made to Abraham. Does that shed light on the question?

Genesis 17:6

6 And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings will emerge from you.

בראשית יז:ו

ו וְהִפְרֵתִי אֹתְךָ בְּמֵאֹד מְאֹד, וְנָתַתִּיךָ לְגוֹיִם;
וּמְלָכִים, מִמְּךָ יֵצְאוּ.

² Ruth 2:11-12

³ Ruth 3:10

⁴ Genesis 18:1-16

Way back in Genesis, God promised that He will make Abraham great and that kings will come from him. Ruth and her great-grandson David are the culmination of the promise to Abraham! And maybe the reason we read this book on Shavuot is because our mission statement as a people begins with Abraham – his story, his actions, what he stood for in his kindness toward others, and in his relationship with God. Perhaps Abraham’s morality gets codified in the 10 Commandments and in the Torah that we received, and perhaps Ruth is a culmination of that mission statement!

Outstanding Mysteries

That would be convenient, wouldn’t it? But it doesn’t feel right just yet. Why not? Because there are some parts that are still vague and uncertain...



PONDER THIS

Here are some difficulties to consider:

- ▶ **The 10 Commandments and the Torah** – how might they represent a codification of a mission statement of Abraham?
- ▶ **The Book of Ruth** – so we’re back to our king answer. We’re suggesting that Ruth is a culmination of a promise to Abraham in the birth of kingship, but the Book of Ruth seems to be about more than the production of a king. We suggested that Ruth is not just a culmination of the *promise* to Abraham, but that it is a culmination of the *mission statement* of Abraham... how?
- ▶ **Abraham** – Abraham seemed like a really nice guy, and a passionate servant of God. Is that the totality of Abraham’s mission statement?

We’re definitely onto something with these parallels between Ruth and Abraham, but it turns out that there’s even more to the story. To see it, we need a deeper understanding of our forefather Abraham... which leads us to a profound question about our beloved patriarch.

The Winning Candidate



PONDER THIS

Why was Abraham chosen?



If you’ve been skipping the ponderings above, this is one of the big ones to pause and consider.

What do we know about Abraham that made him worthy of God happening upon him and sending him to the land of Israel? Remember, God appears to Abraham with the words *lech lecha* (Go!)⁵ long before his kindness to travelers and the binding of Isaac. How did he get to be so beloved of God that he deserved the call of *lech lecha* that led him to become the founder of our religion and the patriarch of our people?

⁵ Genesis 12:1

If you answered...we know why Abraham was chosen, because of that story about Abraham contemplating the universe and finding monotheism all on his own, we agree – it certainly makes Abraham a worthy patriarch. However, that story is Biblical commentary⁶, and absent from our text.

If you answered...no, a different story, the story about Abraham smashing the idols in his father's idol shop, ending up in King Nimrod's fiery furnace and coming out alive...that's *also* a midrash⁷ and not actually in the Biblical text!

A Conspicuous Absence

Why doesn't the Bible seem to tell us why Abraham is chosen? Does the Bible not seem to think it important to understand why the father of our religion deserved his position? Moses gets a great introduction – he cared greatly about social justice, throwing himself in harm's way twice to save an innocent Israelite and again to protect the daughters of Jethro. Even Noah gets a verse telling us that he was a righteous man in his generation. The story we teach our children about Abraham begins with *lech lecha* – God's call to Abraham, seemingly undeserved!



PONDER THIS

Is *lech lecha* really the first time we hear about Abraham?

No, it's not! Abraham is featured in another, earlier, passage in the Bible, six verses prior to *lech lecha*. They are verses about who married whom, who went where – it's easy for us to gloss over this seemingly-boring material, but could this passage answer our questions about Abraham?



LOOK INSIDE: The Real Introduction to Abraham

Read through the passage below. If you've read these verses before and thought nothing of them, try to read without preconceived notions. What questions do you have about these verses?

Genesis 11:27-32

27 And these are the generations of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. **28** And Haran died during the lifetime of Terah his father in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldees. **29** And Abram and Nahor took themselves wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. **30** And Sarai was barren; she had no child. **31** And Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter in law, the wife of Abram his son, and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan, and they came as far as Charan and settled there. **32** And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Charan.

בראשית יא:כז-לב

כז ואֵלֶּה, תּוֹלְדֵי תֶרַח--תֶּרַח הוֹלִיד אֶת-אַבְרָם, אֶת-נָחוֹר וְאֶת-הָרָן; וְהָרָן, הוֹלִיד אֶת-לוֹט. כח וַיָּמָת הָרָן, עַל-פְּנֵי תֶרַח אָבִיו, בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֹתוֹ, בְּאוּר כְּשָׂדִים. כט וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם וְנָחוֹר לָהֶם, נָשִׁים: שָׁם אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם, שָׂרִי, וְשָׁם אִשְׁת־נָחוֹר מִלְכָּה, בַּת-הָרָן אִבִּי-מִלְכָּה וְאִבִּי יִסְכָּה. ל וַתְּהִי שָׂרִי, עֲקָרָה: אֵין לָהּ, וָלֵד. לא וַיִּקַּח תֶּרַח אֶת-אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ, וְאֶת-לוֹט בֶּן-הָרָן בֶּן-בְּנוֹ, וְאֵת שָׂרִי כַלְתּוֹ, אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ; וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם מֵאוּר כְּשָׂדִים, לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-חָרָן, וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם. לב וַיְהִי יְמֵי-תֶרַח, חֲמֵשׁ שָׁנִים וּמֵאֹתַיִם שָׁנָה; וַיָּמָת תֶּרַח, בְּחָרָן.

Don't turn the page until you've given it some thought...

⁶ Maimonides' Laws of Idolatry, Chapter 1

⁷ Bereishit Rabbah 38, 13

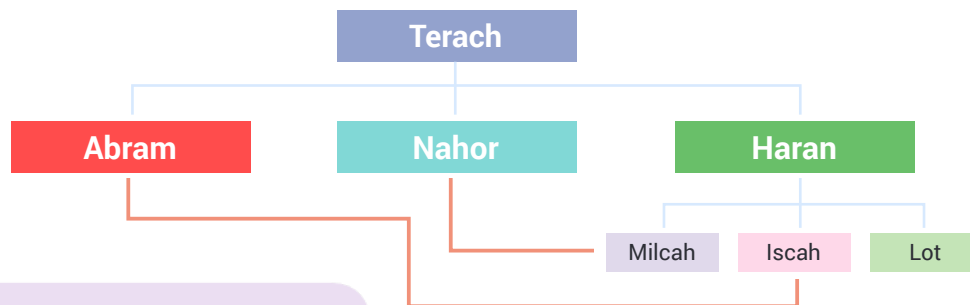
An Odd Introduction

Okay, welcome back! Here are some of the difficulties that we saw:

Verse 29 – Wow. That’s a really confusing verse. Who are Milcah and Iscah and all of these people and why should we even care about them?

Verse 30 – We don’t know anything about Sarai and the first thing we hear about her is that she is infertile – isn’t that awkward, and an invasion of her privacy? Why are we being told about this?

Verse 31 – They were going to Canaan already? I thought God was the one who sent them there? And why did they stop their journey along the way?



LOOK INSIDE: A Second Look

Is there really a story here? Let’s take a second look at it. Try reading verses 28 and 29 together and ask yourself: Where have you heard these words or themes before?

Haran dies in the lifetime of his father Terach (which means he probably died young), leaving two brothers, Abraham and Nahor. Immediately after Haran dies, his two brothers get married – Nahor marries one of Haran’s daughters, Milcah, and Abraham marries Sarai. So what happens to Iscah?

Our Sages tell us that Iscah is Sarai⁸. How did they get to that conclusion? Iscah, which comes from the word *קִיסְיָה* or principedom, means “princess.” Sarai means “my princess.” Sarai, perhaps, was Abraham’s pet name for this wife. (Eventually God renames her Sarah, Princess of the world).

Of Uncles and Nieces

So Abraham marries Iscah.



PONDER THIS

But wait. Why would he and his brother both marry their nieces?



Hint: Take a look at Deuteronomy 25:5-6. Does this passage remind you of anything?

⁸ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Megillah 14a

5 If brothers live together, and one of them dies and has no child, the man's widow shall not marry an outsider. Rather, her husband's brother shall be intimate with her, and take her to him as a wife, thus performing the duty of a husband's brother with her.

6 And it will be, that the first child that she bears will perpetuate the name of the dead brother, that his name not be blotted out in Israel.

ה כִּי-יָשְׁבוּ אֲחִים יַחְדָּו, וּמֵת אֶחָד מֵהֶם וְגֵן
אֵין-לוֹ--לֹא-תִהְיֶה אִשְׁת־הַמֵּת הַחוּצָה, לְאִישׁ זָר:
יִבְמָה יָבֵא עָלֶיהָ, וּלְקַחָהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבַמָּה. ו
הָיָה, הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד--יָקוּם, עַל-שֵׁם אָחִיו
הַמֵּת; וְלֹא-יִמָּחֶה שְׁמוֹ, מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

In Deuteronomy, the Bible presents a law called yibum, whereby a man is called upon to marry the widow of his deceased brother... doesn't it sound like Nahor and Abraham are doing a yibum-like act? It's not *real* yibum because they would have married Haran's *widow* and yibum doesn't need to be performed if Haran had children, but it sure sounds a lot like yibum.⁹



PONDER THIS

From the verses of Deuteronomy 25:5-6, what do you think is the purpose of yibum? Why do yibum?

From the verses in Deuteronomy it seems like the purpose of yibum is twofold:

1

Take care of the woman who was a part of your family through marriage (verse 5) – in Deuteronomy, a widow, in our case, daughters.

2

Let the dead person's name not be blotted out from Israel. Give him a legacy (verse 6). Haran had one son, Lot, and two daughters - perhaps not as many children as he would have had, if he hadn't died young.

Hurrah! Abraham did the mitzvah of yibum and that's why he was chosen! But...do we really buy that? Who cares? Is it just about doing a mitzvah? If Abraham had shaken a lulav, would that have merited him being chosen? What is so special about this mitzvah?

A Looming Shadow

Let's pull back the zoom lens just a little bit. The stories of the Bible usually flow from one to the other; themes shed light and give context to the stories immediately before and after it. Perhaps we will find a clue to what was going on in Abraham's story by looking at the story that precedes it: the Tower of Babel.

⁹ Indeed, Nachmanides points out that the concept of yibum predated the giving of the Torah.