

FROM THE BOOK OF RUTH TO THE MODERN GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS: HOW DO WE WELCOME THE STRANGER?

A SHAVUOT STUDY SESSION



INTRODUCTION

June 20th is World Refugee Day, which is not long after the Jewish community celebrates Shavuot, a holiday on which we read the story of Ruth, a stranger in a strange land. This study session connects the Book of Ruth to the global refugee crisis and explores the Torah's wisdom on different ways we might respond to the crisis. It can be used at a Tikkun Leil Shavuot or during the Shabbat preceding the holiday.

This session has several interlocking components and is meant to be used in its entirety. In order to facilitate this, you will likely want to move through each section at a fairly quick pace. Below you will find an outline of the session followed by a step-by-step guide for how we imagine you might facilitate this teaching. You should, of course, add your own insights, questions, and reflections as you facilitate.

We recommend printing the source sheet in color for the best results.

SUGGESTED OUTLINE

Here is a brief outline of the arc of the study session:

- ↳ Context about the Book of Ruth (5 minutes)
- ↳ Ruth as a Stranger (20 minutes)
- ↳ How Ruth Is Assisted as a Stranger: Boaz Takes Direct and Immediate Action (10 minutes)
- ↳ The Daughters of Zelophehad: Making Systemic Change (10 minutes)
- ↳ Today's Strangers: The Global Refugee Crisis (30 minutes)
- ↳ Ways to Take Action and Make Change (5 minutes)

CONTEXT ABOUT THE BOOK OF RUTH

Facilitators should begin by providing participants with some background about the Book of Ruth. Something along the lines of:

The Book of Ruth, traditionally read on the holiday of Shavuot, tells the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman, and her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, when they are forced to flee their home in the wake of a terrible famine. Ruth's husband, Mahlon, has died, and she pledges her loyalty to Naomi. The book details their story of survival as they arrive in Bethlehem.

RUTH AS A STRANGER

After you provide context for the way in which the Book of Ruth is traditionally discussed, transition to a discussion about Ruth as a stranger. While Ruth is usually seen as the paradigmatic conversion story, the text also explores what it means to be other – whether as a stranger in a strange land or as a woman in a patriarchal society. Though we do not know for certain whether Ruth was a refugee, we can learn something from her story about the experience people may have when they are perceived as strangers.

Point out to participants that Ruth is referred to as “Ruth the Moabite” seven times (see Ruth 1:4, 1:22, 2:2, 2:6, 2:21, 4:5, 4:9-10). The other characters in the story are not described by their ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi, seemingly casting her lot with the Jewish people, which is why her story is held up as the paradigmatic example of conversion. Yet, Ruth is not immediately accepted as part of the Israelite people. Read Ruth 1:14-1:19 and *Ruth Zuta* 1:8, and then discuss the questions below.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What effect does the repetition of Ruth’s background as a Moabite woman have, particularly in contrast to Ruth’s pledge of loyalty at the beginning of the book in Ruth 1:14-19? Whose perspective is this designation? How internalized is this designation? Does Ruth see herself as a stranger?
2. Based on the midrash from *Ruth Zuta*, does Naomi see Ruth as a stranger? What does it mean to see someone as a stranger?
3. What is Otherness/Foreignness? In a place like America, a nation formed by immigrants and refugees, who decides who is foreign?
4. Similar to Ruth, the 65 million displaced people and refugees around the world find themselves in a liminal place. Is their primary identity that of stranger? At what point do they become a stranger and to whom – are they strangers to themselves?

HOW RUTH IS ASSISTED AS A STRANGER: BOAZ TAKES DIRECT AND IMMEDIATE ACTION

Next, transition into a discussion of the fact that, despite Ruth’s clear designation as a stranger, she is still eventually helped and protected – explicitly as a stranger. Read Ruth 2:5-10, *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:8, and the passage from *Bava Batra* 91a and discuss the questions on the next page.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Boaz go about helping Ruth? What opportunities does he miss?
2. If Boaz fully took on the challenges Ruth is facing as key concerns, what are some of the ways that he could make life easier for the next generation of young women in her situation (i.e., widows, converts, foreign workers)?

Be sure to lift up the fact that Boaz acts directly on Ruth's immediate needs. As the texts from *Bava Batra* and *Leviticus Rabbah* suggest, there also seems to even be a dichotomy between the way in which Boaz speaks to Ruth and the way in which he treats her. According to *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Bava Batra*, Boaz is much more generous with Ruth in word than in deed. Perhaps, Boaz could have thought more about the challenges that Ruth would face in the long-term, not to mention what other widowed young women might face in the future.

THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD: MAKING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Explain to participants that, while Boaz models one way of assisting a person in need – by taking direct action – our tradition also contains examples of a more long-term systemic approach through policy change. One example, in fact, is related to the laws of *yibum*, which also come up in the Book of Ruth.

Read the story of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1-5) and the midrash from *Sifre*.

Ask participants if they see a difference in the chain of events that lead to change as described in Numbers 27 versus the midrash from *Sifre*. Point out that, according to Numbers 27:1-5, the daughters of Zelophehad bring their case to Moses who then immediately brings it before God. The midrash from *Sifre*, on the other hand, explains that, in fact, the daughters of Zelophehad think much more systemically about their situation and realize that their inability to inherit is due to their gender. Accordingly, they seek to change the system for all women, rather than advocating only for themselves.

After you have parsed Numbers 27:1-5 and the midrash from *Sifre*, discuss the question below.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do the examples of Boaz helping Ruth and the daughters of Zelophehad advocating for change translate into the ways that we work both directly and systemically for social justice today?

TODAY'S STRANGER: THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS

Tell participants that, now that you have discussed two of the ways that Jewish tradition shows us that we can make change, you are going to learn a bit more about those who walk in Ruth shoes today: the 65 million refugees and displaced people around the world.

Review the definition of a refugee on the source sheet, lifting up the three main parts of the definition: 1.) a refugee has experienced persecution because of one of the 5 categories as noted in the definition 2.) a refugee has crossed an international border and 3.) a refugee has been granted some sort of status or protection by UNHCR or their host country's government.

After you review the definition, read the narrative of Rami Abou Jabr and discuss the questions below.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do you think Rami is able to feel at home in the United States? Thinking about the framework of helping a stranger through direct and immediate action and long-term, systemic change, in what ways has Rami been helped to feel less like a stranger and to be integrated into the U.S.?

Be sure to lift up the fact that Rami was helped both directly and because of systemic change. The fact that he was resettled in the United States is due to the fact that, after the Holocaust, many member nations of the UN came together to create international refugee law which led to durable solutions, such as resettlement. Rami and his family, therefore, received comprehensive assistance. They were helped directly with a new home and material goods. They were also given the tools needed to be successful in their new life in the United States, such as English language tutoring to help them find jobs and become self-sufficient.

Next, briefly review the "Facts and Figures about the Global Refugee Crisis" to show participants that Rami's story is one of many in a huge and sprawling global refugee crisis.

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION AND MAKE CHANGE

Conclude the study session by telling participants that the texts you have studied together today provide a useful framework for how they might approach taking action on the global refugee crisis. There are ways to take immediate action and to create long-term change – whether through future learning, direct service, advocacy, or *tzedakah*.

Take some time to review the suggestions at the end of the source handout. If your community has started to take action on the global refugee crisis, now would also be a good time to talk to the group about your initiatives.

Wrap up the study session by asking participants if there is one action they want to take – either responding to immediate need or making systemic change – to help end the global refugee crisis.