

## Using Philosophical Inquiry to make meaning of Naomi's Silence in Megilat Ruth.

Ruth's famous plea to Naomi to let her come with her is one of the best known parts of the Megilat Ruth - we expect Naomi to be happy, to be touched by this moving speech and reach out to Ruth.... but what really happens next? In the text we are told that Naomi's response to Ruth is silence (verse 18, Naomi 'ceases from speaking' to her (וַתִּחַדֵּל, לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ). In this session participants engaged in philosophical inquiry around the concept of silence and its uses in order to explore Naomi's silence. Was her silence a way of giving Ruth permission to come, or was Naomi simply left speechless? Was it a way of stepping back and letting Ruth make up her own mind or does she then just ignore Ruth as each continued the journey in their own space (וַתִּלְכְּנָה שְׁתֵּיהֶם)? What else might it have meant? After exploring our own uses of silence we returned to the text and explored what we thought Naomi's silence meant as we looked at a range of traditional and modern commentaries, including seven different images of this moment portrayed in art and sculpture. Breaking into groups we then created a 'freeze frame' of this moment as we interpreted it.

### About the Author

Dr. Jen Glaser is Director of "Engaging Texts" [www.engagingtexts.com](http://www.engagingtexts.com) which offers professional development opportunities and a teacher network for Jewish educators building communities of philosophical inquiry in their classrooms and institutions. She also consults with schools around issues of pluralism, Design Thinking, and was a JEIC designer generating an innovative model of Jewish education focused on working with teens around identity issues. She brings her 25 years of experience with Philosophy for Children to this work.

### What is this approach to Jewish education?

**The need for meaning centered education:** In an open world in which the next generation is faced with fluid choices about how to live, Jewish education needs to help our students develop both the capacity to construct meaningful Jewish identities and a sense of purpose that is:

- Informed by the ongoing Jewish conversation
- Lived in community
- In dialogue with the world around them, and
- Grounded in sound judgment

Yet figuring out who we are and how we ought to live cannot be done in isolation from other people. That is to say, 'Thinking for myself' is not a solitary activity – it happens through engaging with the voices of others - both voices of other members of our own communities, and the voices that make up the extended conversation of our traditions 'over time' - voices within Jewish and Western culture that we are able to engage with through the written word and through the Arts. In helping our students develop their own identities and sense of purpose in community with others we are also building their capacity to create vibrant Jewish communities engaged in the 'Big Questions' concerning how we ought to live.

**Philosophical Inquiry in Jewish Education:** Philosophy taps children’s natural curiosity and engages them in a search for meaning. Philosophy is the arena in which we make sense of our experience, figure ourselves out and develop a worldview. It awakens our puzzlement and curiosity, grabbing our attention and inviting a response. Abraham Heschel suggested that philosophy is ‘the art of asking the right questions’ – questions such as:

- What makes something fair?
- Is honoring someone and respecting them the same thing?
- What do we mean when we say something is a miracle?

Questions however are the end of a thinking process, not the beginning of one. First we are puzzled by something, something grabs our attention, bothers us or pulls us up short – forming a question that captures this puzzlement is itself hard work! Developing the capacity to *find an interest* and *ask a question* is critical to a meaning-centered education, it shifts the pedagogical moment from one of response/reaction to initiation/proaction.

Philosophical Inquiry in Jewish Education *combines rigorous exploration of meaning with community building and rich, deep Jewish content knowledge* through a pedagogy that enables students to think for themselves as a member of a deliberative community. Group discussion is not only seen as a pedagogy but as the means by which we name, make sense of and evaluate our experience and our ideas. Through creating **communities of inquiry**, participants engage in collaborative meaning-making. Such deliberation maintains individual autonomy (I must still figure out for myself where I stand on the issues discussed), but places this thinking within a communal context that recognizes human inter-dependence. As a communal activity, cognitive work is thereby integrated with deep attention to building reflective, creative and caring community.

This approach to education is *midrashic* in nature: involving close reading of text, a playfulness and openness to interpretation, along with the understanding that interpretation happens in connection to the thinking of others (both those who have come before us and our contemporaries).

Central to this approach is an interplay between the world of the child and the text. This happens through exploring the meaning of key concepts and language as it resonates in the child’s life alongside meanings contained in the interpretative tradition. Discussion plans are offered for this purpose. For example, exploring the concept “Miracle” we might use a discussion plan that asks the students what the word ‘miracle’ means when it is used in everyday contexts such as:

**Discuss what the term ‘miracle’ means in each of these situations**

1. “It was a miracle he survived the accident”
2. “At Hannukah we talk about the miracle of the oil”
3. “When my baby brother was born and I saw him for the first time I thought ‘this is a miracle’”
4. “The trapeze artist performed miraculous feats of daring”
5. “My biology teacher talks about the miracle of life on earth”
6. “It was a miracle that I got my homework done on time”
7. “The magician pulled a rabbit out of the hat – it was a miracle!”
8. “I used to take butterflies for granted, but now we have studied them, I think each one is a tiny miracle!”

The point here is not that there is right or wrong answer, a true meaning or a false one – what we are tapping into in discussing these examples is the child’s existing understanding of what this term signifies. To reflect on and articulate the meaning of the term in their existing conceptual scheme.

Alongside this, students are introduced to different understandings of the meaning of ‘miracle’ within our tradition (Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Sforno, Maimonides, along with contemporary voices). By broadening the range of possible meanings available to them, we help them develop nuanced meaning-structures through which they are able to interpret their own lives. (My favorite anecdote is about a group of grade 3 students who were getting ready for a class trip, and the teacher was hurrying them to the bus. One student turned to another and said “What is this, an exodus?” The student had internalized the meaning of exodus and could draw on this meaning in reference to their own life, even if in a somewhat wry manner!)

## Shavuot Session

### Naomi’s Silence “and she ceased from talking to her” וַתִּחְדַּל, לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ

This session explores the meaning of silence in general and Naomi’s silence in particular. Earlier we said that ‘philosophy begins in wonder’ – that it involves puzzlement or being ‘pulled up short’ by something unexpected. That is what happens here. In a speech that has become famous, Ruth declares her loyalty and love to Naomi:

Do not plead with me to leave you, to return from following you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you sleep, I will sleep; your people shall be my people and your God my God Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So may Adonai do to me and so may [Adonai] continue, if anything but death separate me and you

What is Naomi’s response? We might imagine that Naomi now turns to her with an embrace. But that is not what happens. At the end of her declaration we find something unexpected. We read: “And she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her, *and she stopped speaking to her.*” Philosophy begins in wonder – “so *silence* is her response? What *kind* of silence was it? What could such silence mean?” Was her silence a way of giving Ruth permission to come, or was Naomi simply left speechless? Was it a way of stepping back and letting Ruth make up her own mind or does she then just ignore Ruth as each continued the journey in their own space (וַתִּלְכְּנָה שְׁתֵּייהֶם)? What else might it have meant?

In the resources around Naomi’s silence you will find discussion plans on the meaning silence along with interpretations of the meaning and uses of silence from the tradition (Rashi, Pirkei Avot, Baruch Spinoza, Martin Buber, Pamela Wax and Wendy Amsellem) and artistic renditions of the relationship between the three women at this critical moment.

Resources: Link to teaching resources: <http://engagingtexts.com/2017/11/5155/>

- Text: Book of Ruth verses 8, 14-19 (one copy per person)
- US Letter/standard page sized prints of different works of art portraying the relationship between Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. (one copy of each)
- Camera or phone to take pictures
- Copies of the discussion plan “The meaning of silence” (one between two, or one each)
- Copies of the secondary sources on silence.

## Lesson plan:

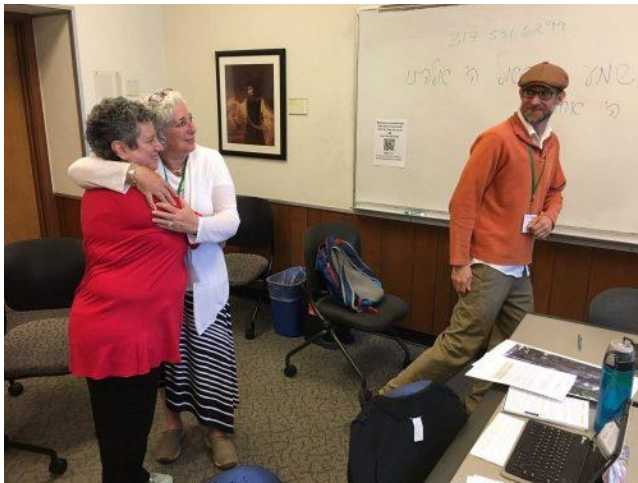
1. Read the text together (verses 8, 14-19. Leaving out 9-13 in order to focus on the part we are interested in more fully)
2. Introducing the problem: Read verse 18 again – focusing on the verb. Is this what we expected? What does it mean to 'cease talking' at such a time? What meanings can the response of silence have?
3. As a whole group, do the discussion plan on the meaning of silence. Take time to encourage the students to explain what they mean as fully as they can. ("Can you say a little more about what you mean here?" Encourage students to ask each other follow-up questions.
4. Explore together the meaning of Naomi's silence – what kind of silence or ceasing from speech do they think it is?
5. Turn to some of the secondary sources – read and discuss them (you might also divide the students into pairs and give each pair a different source and then have them come back together to share their source and what they think it means/says about silence and its uses.)
6. Ask them what questions they now have about Naomi's silence and write these on the board or on a flip chart (write the question in the words of the student and put their name after their question).
7. Take out the images of the relationship between the three women – put them at different points around the room. Divide the students into groups of 3 and have them go around and look at each one. How has the artist interpreted Naomi? the relationship between the three women?
8. Have each group stand by the one that they found most interesting/spoke to them the most. Invite them to share why this one spoke to them.
9. In the same groups of 3, ask each group to create a 'freeze frame' capturing their own interpretation of the relationship between Naomi, Ruth and Orpah at this critical moment.
10. Go around each group and ask them to show their freeze frame- take a picture of it. (this can then be put up on the wall with an explanation, or sent home to the parents with an explanation of what the students did, etc).



**"Our group shows 3 very sad women, bereft of their husbands and lives and now having to move on to something new. Not always easy but necessary. I am so glad the book of Ruth made it into our TANACH" Chava (Cynthia) Lebowitz**



"I was in a group with Jen. She posed as Ruth, being determined to join Naomi, support her, and share her destiny. I posed as Naomi, feeling torn between the desire to have Ruth accompany her, between the fear of Ruth's future in Beth Lechem, and between the feeling of a selfish guilt, wanting Ruth by her side, without thinking about what's best for Ruth." Esti BenDavid



"Our group (Louise, Rena & Aviv) chose the traditional interpretation - Ruth & Naomi hugging each other in support with Orpah leaving with somewhat mixed emotions." Louise Riddell-Kaufman, Director of Education, Congregation Beth Israel, Carmel, CA



Exploring the relationship between the three women at this pivotal moment through art.

"Thank you for a meaningful session about Naomi's Silence. You have so beautifully invited us to read the text from different perspectives. Focusing on Naomi's silence became an essential detail in my reading the Megilah." Esti BenDavid