

PLAYBILL

BETH TZEDEC ZOOM THEATRE



Megillat Ruth

Wednesday, May 12, 2021/ 1 Sivan 5781

7:45 pm

Megillat Ruth – Overview

Megillat Ruth - Levirate Marriages and the Davidic Monarchy

Megillat Ruth is remarkable for both its brevity and how much occurs in its four chapters – a famine in Judah, moving from Bethlehem to Moab and then back, two Moabite marriages, three deaths and a levirate wedding, and by the final chapter, a son/grandson establishing the lineage of David, from which the legitimate line of Hebrew kings arise.

Two common themes are levirate marriages, where a childless widow and brother-in-law are expected to marry and the genealogy in the last verses establishing a direct link between Boaz and Ruth, to David, the eventual true king of Israel.

The levirate/redemption ceremony described in the Megillah involves “sandals” [Ruth 4:7]. The Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto (currently closed due to the pandemic but worth a visit upon re-opening) has a pair of levirate shoes in its extensive and fascinating collection [<https://batashoemuseum.ca/>].

Megillat Ruth – 2020

Covid-19 induced isolation and Zoom’s unexplored capabilities motivated us to re-imagine how to present Megillat Ruth in a completely unique way. It was performed via Zoom as musical theatre with a faithful English translation of the Megillah in its entirety serving as our script.

We then added familiar songs to draw parallels between the many kindnesses freely and generously offered between our Megillah characters and the many acts of communal kindness and generosity that occurred during these early stages of our self-imposed Covid isolation; in particular, Ruth’s iconic refusal to leave Naomi’s side; Boaz instructing his “reapers” who gleaned wheat and barley to generously (and surreptitiously) share with Ruth; Boaz giving Ruth extra provisions for her mother-in-law, Naomi; and most gallantly, Boaz ensuring that Ruth left his abode in darkness so as not to embarrass Ruth in an early morning departure from his dwelling, (a parting commonly referred to as the “walk of shame”).

Megillat Ruth - 2021

In May 2021, we re-visit Megillat Ruth as an all new musical, adding fresh insights thanks to the amazing depth and versatility of the Megillah and necessitated by our Covid-related, changing communal awareness and needs.

A Deeper Dive into the Megillah - Food Insecurity and Mental Health

“All drama is conflict. Without conflict, you have no action; without action, you have no character; without character, you have no story.” Syd Field

Megillat Ruth ends on a very happy note – the many gracious actions leading up to a wedding, the birth of a child/grandchild and the establishment of the Davidic monarchy, the giving of the Torah and our celebration of Shavout.

But the author of Megillat Ruth understood that drama requires conflict and it is therefore unsurprising that it begins in a very dark place with a famine-necessitated relocation to the lands of an ancestral enemy, multiple deaths, hunger and depression.

Naomi, Elimelech and their two sons are what we would now call “food refugees”, forced to flee from Judah to (traditional enemy) Moab to obtain adequate nourishment.

This year our ensemble relies on two very prominent but ignored aspects of the Megillah story to raise awareness of two aspects of our pandemic and post-pandemic world.

Food Insecurity

Megillat Ruth opens with Naomi’s family leaving Bethlehem for Moab during a famine. Although Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem because the famine is over, their need for adequate food remains. Ruth gathers wheat and barley to feed herself and her mother-in-law. The adequacy of their food supply remains dire and unpredictable, as can be inferred from three observations - Boaz is frequently giving Ruth extra portions to take back to Naomi; Naomi blesses this giver of food; and Ruth is only described as “being full” *after* being *given* food by Boaz, not on account of her own persistent efforts at gathering sustenance.

Food Insecurity is defined as the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints or other limited resources. It negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health. It did not disappear with Moab and it remains a local, national and international problem.

Beth Tzedec Synagogue has established a ***Food Insecurity Fund***. It is also partnered with Beth Sholom Synagogue in their joint ***Out of the Cold*** program. Park Avenue Synagogue has a long running ***Food Pantry Program***. There are many other food bank, food drive and food-related organizations and opportunities in *your* city. The need is great.

Mental Health

By verse 5 of Chapter 1 of Megillat Ruth, Naomi's husband and sons have died. There is literally no dialogue in Megillat Ruth until verse 8. The first words spoken are spoken by Naomi and they are not warm or welcoming: *"Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me!"*

Naomi's expressed desire to be left alone grows increasingly harsh and bleak and she eventually asks to be called Mara, [Ruth 1:20] for her life is exceedingly bitter and empty. Although Naomi's depression appears to disappear with the birth of her grandchild, not all stories end as happily and not all ailments are so easily observed or cured.

What is riveting about Naomi's depression is how deep and consuming it is; her willingness to admit to it, and to identify its cause – the death of her husband and two sons. Naomi is neither concerned about being embarrassed nor stigmatized for being unwell. Equally powerful, when Naomi is ready to rejoin her community, she is clearly unconditionally and excitedly welcomed back.

Lessons extracted from the Megillah – be ready to talk. Be ready to listen. Don't judge.

One of the sidebars to the second impeachment trial of Donald Trump in January 2021, was the story of Congressman Jaime Raskin and his wife Sarah Bloom Raskin who sat shiva for their son Tommy, a university student who left the following note before taking his own life.

"Please forgive me. My illness won today." Sadly, that type of story has been heard too often during the pandemic.

Many organizations across North America are devoted to addressing mental health issues, even some you may not associate with mental health – like Toronto sportscaster Michael Landsberg partnering with Bell Canada. Organizations with slogans like:

Apart, Not Alone. It's OK not to be Ok. Sick, Not Weak. Not Today.

You Are Not Alone. Start the Conversation.

If you or someone you know is having difficulties, start the conversation, whether with a friend or family member, your synagogue's clergy or a local mental health organization.

Make the call, take the call. Tell a friend. Check up on a friend.

Food Insecurity and mental health are not limited to Bible stories. And Food Insecurity is not only a nutritional issue but a mental health issue.

Food insecurity is not only associated with a variety of physical health problems, but growing number of studies have documented links between food insecurity and adverse mental health outcomes, such as higher rates of depression, stress and anxiety.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2020012/article/00001-eng.htm>

We are not raising money. We are attempting to raise awareness.

Help the hungry. End the stigma. Break the silence. Start the conversation.

2020 was notable for its failures. Make 2021 memorable for our successes.

The Soundtrack to *Megillat Ruth - The Musical* ® is available to **Spotify**® and **Amazon Music**® subscribers (along with bonus material). For music links, please contact Larry Wallach at LFW@wallach.ca

Soundtracks to *Maccabees: The Musical Featuring the Book of Judith*®, and *Motown: Megillat Esther* ® are also available to **Spotify**® and **Amazon Music**® subscribers.

The cast of *Megillat Ruth - The Musical* consists of Canadians and Americans, united in using their love of music to celebrate Jewish moments in engaging, innovative, unconventional and meaningful ways during the pandemic and sharing their passion with others.



CAST

Arnie Ursaner
Darcy Dalton
Karen Frankel
Patti Rotman
Sheldon Rotman

Barry Frankel
Debbie Rothstein
Lorraine Gangbar
Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin

Cantor Sidney Ezer
Gary Elman
Nina Wallach
Sharon Yale
Larry Wallach

Feedback is always welcome at LFW@wallach.ca