



Rivka's Way by Teri Kanefield Study Guide

Part I: Introduction

This study guide aims to provide material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit, or book-club discussion about the novel *Rivka's Way* by Teri Kanefield. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept *ometz lev*, courage, addressed in the Adar 5766 issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Rivka's Way is a work of historical fiction, set in Prague in 1778, when Jews were forced to live behind ghetto walls. After her brother leaves to study at a Polish yeshiva, fifteen-year-old Rivka Lieberman's longing to see the outside world intensifies. One day, she finally sets out for adventure, disguising herself as a Gentile boy (for safety) and sneaking past the ghetto guards. Outside, she befriends a kind Christian boy who is badly in debt after the death of his parents. Rivka ventures out several more times to help her new friend, but she fears the consequences if anyone were to discover her secret. What she discovers outside the ghetto walls dramatically changes the way she views her neighbors, her family, herself, and her future. *Rivka's Way* captures the curiosity, compassion, and determination of a young girl struggling to find her place in the world.

To help plan for the study of the novel, this guide offers:

- Questions for study and discussion
- Passages for close analysis
- Lesson ideas
- Writing activities
- Projects

Combine any components of the guide to help shape your lessons on the novel. You may also want to use the ideas as a means of offering enrichment and extra credit to students who wish to read the novel.

Part II: Questions for Study and Discussion

Setting:

- Where and when does the story take place?
- Describe Rivka's daily life as it's presented in the beginning of the novel. How does her family live?
- What is happening in Prague at this time? How are the Jews living differently than the Christians?

Characters:

- Why doesn't Jakob live at home? How does his absence affect Rivka?
- Why is Rivka nervous around Oskar Kara at first? How do her feelings towards him change?
- What role do Rivka's friends have in her adventures? Why do Friedl and Chavele react differently to her tales?
- What happens to Mikul at the end of the story? How do you think he feels towards Rivka?
- Do you think Rivka was happy to marry Oskar Kara? Why or why not?

Plot:

- How does Rivka's first trip outside the ghetto affect her? Why do you think she decides to go out again?
- Why is Mikul arrested? What about the law is unfair?
- What happens to Rivka and Oskar at the end of the novel? What does this mean for the future of Jews in Prague?
- What does it mean to have an "arranged" marriage? Is this a good or bad thing? Why don't we do this today?

Part III: Passages for Close Analysis

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She sensed her father watching her as she stood there, and she knew she couldn't tell him these things. The soaring feeling inside her that made her want to fling her arms wide was a secret she had to guard carefully.

What feeling was Rivka experiencing? Why couldn't she tell her father about it?

Page 57-8

Rivka felt as shocked as if she had discovered the walls of the Jewish quarter for the first time. So this was how her home appeared from the outside: a squalid city within the larger one. The wall was like a hideous slash through a beautiful painting, destroying the charm and warmth of the shop-lined alley.

What changed Rivka's perspective on the Jewish quarter? How has it changed?

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She simply could not let Mikul, who had been kind to her, sit in prison without help, and without a friend. How good she felt to have a goal, a purpose, something large that she must do. This must be how her father, a doctor... felt all the time. This was how Jakob would feel when he became a rabbi....

What is Rivka's goal? How does this goal relate to the goals of a doctor or a rabbi?

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Rivka had been taught that the Jews were the chosen people, and as such, they had a mission to humanity: to live as a light among nations, showing others the way to God. But how could they be a chosen people, a light among nations, if they closed their eyes to injustice?

What injustice does Rivka see? How would fixing this injustice make her “a light among nations”? What does it mean to be part of the “chosen people”?

Page 84-5

Should she try once more to talk to her parents? No, they had told her not to mention Mikul again, and a parental order was as binding as any law. This left her with a painful choice: risk leaving the quarter in disguise a third time or keep Mikul’s money when he needed it so badly. Keeping Mikul’s money was wrong. If she did as her parents wanted, she would be ignoring their years of teaching. A woman’s greatest virtue was her compassion and willingness to help others, and helping Mikul was the right and compassionate thing to do.

How was a parental order like a law? What does it mean that compassion and a willingness to help others was a woman’s greatest virtue? Is this still true? Do you agree with Rivka’s decision? What would you have done?

Page 109

Once she was out of the quarter she changed into her jacket and cap and walked along, looking people square in the face, holding herself tall, walking with a strong, purposeful stride. Boys’ clothes, she decided, made her feel powerful.

What about boys’ clothes make Rivka feel powerful? Why do you think this was the case?

Part IV: Lesson Ideas

- Historical Simulation: 18th-century Jewish Prague

Students will be responsible for researching the Jewish culture— including food, music, poetry, and art— of the period. To do so, divide students into research groups according to the above categories.

Each group will be responsible for presenting their research in a communal celebration. Students will simulate this historical period decorating the space with examples of art, serving food from the region, etc.

Suggested resources from www.myjewishlearning.com:

- Jewish Virtual Library, “Prague”:
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Prague.html>
- Ashkenazi cuisine
http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/food/Overview_Ashkenazi_Cuisine/Food_Hapsburgian_Edited.htm
- Jewish Art in Medieval & Modern Times:
http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/Art/TO_ArtOverview/ArtHistory/ArtMedievalModern.htm
- Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav (1772-1810, Ukraine) said, “The entire world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is not to fear at all.” Teach your students the song for this quote, available for download here:
<http://www.greatjewishmusic.com/Midifiles/Kol%20HaOlam.htm>

Sing it together, then use the following questions as a guide for a class discussion:

- What does this quote mean?
 - How is the world like a narrow bridge?
 - Why is it important not to fear?
 - How does this quote relate to *Rivka's Way*?
 - How does she demonstrate *ometz lev*, courage?
 - Have you ever faced a situation when you showed courage like Rivka?
- Celebrate Rivka's Wedding!
In the afterword, Rivka marries Oskar. Part of the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony includes the presentation of a *ketubah*, or Jewish marriage contract. Draw a *ketubah* for Rivka and Oskar, decorating it with images of their courtship and words of wisdom as they enter their marriage.

Part IV: Writing Activities

- Have students write a journal entry as if they were Rivka. Students should choose one of three points in the novel about which to write:
 - a) Rivka's life inside the ghetto
 - b) Rivka's relationship with her family and her fear of marrying Oskar
 - c) Rivka's adventures into the outside world and the beauty she finds there
- Rivka's Jewish identity is a fundamental component of her character. The yellow star worn by Jews outside the ghetto marks this identity, but Rivka chooses not to wear it. Ask your students to why they think this is the case. Discuss how Rivka understands her Jewish identity and the ways it is expressed in the novel. Then, have students write a personal reflection about how their understanding of Judaism and Jewish values is expressed in their daily lives and important decisions.
- At the end of the novel, Oskar is heading toward the gates to meet Mikul and give him enough money to make it to Germany. Rivka will probably never see Mikul again. Think about all the important things that she has learned from her relationship with Mikul, and write a letter from her perspective for Oskar to take with him and present to Mikul. Be sure to thank him for everything he has taught her and explain why she did so much to help him.

Part IV: Projects

- God in Nature
"Rivka closed her eyes and prayed as hard as she could, 'Dear God, Master of the Universe, keep me safe out there. I only want to see for myself all of what you have created, your beautiful hills and trees'." (p. 41)

"In a sunny glade not far away was a bed of clover sown thickly with buttercups. She knelt to inspect one of the blossoms and found the petals feathery and light to the touch. The sweet smell of earth mixed with the scent of ripening apples and the musky smell of wood and bark. The slanting light through the trees and the abundance of life all around her made her feel that she was very close to God." (p.65)

Surrounded by nature, Rivka feels God's presence. Read the following story from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and discuss times when the students have felt close to God in nature.

"The child of certain rabbi used to wander in the woods. At first his father let him wander, but over time he became concerned. The woods were dangerous. The father did not know what lurked there. He decided to discuss the matter with his child. One day he took him aside and said 'You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder, why do you go there?' The boy said to his father, 'I go there to find God.' 'That is a very good thing,' the father replied gently. 'I am glad you are searching for God. But, my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?' 'Yes,' the boy answered, 'but I'm not.'"

Have your students draw or paint a picture of place where they feel close to God.

- Identity collage

Rivka's Way is, among other things, a story of self-discovery. Throughout the course of the novel, Rivka plays with her identity by dressing up as a non-Jewish boy and experiencing how it makes her feel. Gender and religion are two important aspects of one's identity. In this activity, students will create an "identity collage" as a means to explore their own sense of personal identity. Using photographs, magazines, newsprint, or other materials, students will create a collage that represents the people, values, symbols, and issues that are central to their lives. Those students that wish to share should briefly present their creation to the rest of the class and explain why they chose certain images or words.

- Modern-day Prague

The afterword explains what happened in Prague and how the Jewish community developed.

Have your students research modern-day Prague and what Jewish life there is like.

Jewish Museum in Prague: <http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/aindex.htm>

Chabad: <http://www.chabadprague.cz/jewish.htm>

Talking Cities: http://www.talkingcities.co.uk/prague_pages/sights_jewish.htm

Jewish Virtual Library: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Prague.html>

World Union of Jewish Students: http://www.wujs.org.il/stu/travel/city_guides/prague.shtml

Jewish Theological Seminary: <http://www.jtsa.edu/about/communications/pubs/bestof/jp.shtml>