The Cross by Day, the Mezuzzah by Night

Study Guide

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 *The Cross by Day, the Mezuzzah by Night* by Deborah Spector Siegel. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept *emet* addressed in the Tevet issue of BABAGANEWZ.

The Cross by Day, the Mezuzzah by Night is a work of historical fiction, set in Seville 1492. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella have just ordered the expulsion of all Jews from Spain. The novel follows Isabel Caruso de Caravallo, a privileged Catholic girl who, on the day she turns thirteen, learns the truth - that her family are *Marranos*, secret Jews. On that day, Isabel discovers her Jewish name, Ruth, and is presented with the family *mezuzah*, which belonged to Isabel's great-grandmother. Confronted with the harsh, tragic reality of persecution, she undergoes a process from Isabel to Ruth, as she leaves Seville to join the Jewish refugees heading toward the sea. *The Cross by Day, the Mezuzzah by Night* captures the strength and determination of Ruth's efforts to preserve her family and her culture.

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.

II.QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION:

Setting:

❶ Where and when does the story take place?

❷ Describe Isabel's daily life as it's presented in the beginning of the novel. How does her family live? What strange family customs does she reveal?

❸ What is happening in Seville at this time: who is in power and what rules do they enforce in terms of religious practice?

Characters:
❶ What are the circumstances surrounding *bisabuela* Ruth's conversion to Christianity? What were the other options for Jews at that time?

❷ Who is Tomas de Torquemada? What is his relationship to the King and Queen?

❸ Who is Esteban de Gomez? What is his relationship with Paulos? How does he help Ruth, her mother, and Manuel?

❹ At the end of the novel, we are introduced to Senor Levi. What is his role in the Toledo Jewish community? Why is he initially suspicious of Ruth?

Plot:
❶ What is Isabel's reaction upon learning the truth about her identity? What event in the novel solidifies her connection to Judaism?

❷ What role did her bother Tomas play in what happens to Isabel's father?

❸ To where is Ruth headed at the end of the novel? Why is this the desired destination for the Jews of Spain?

III. PASSAGES:

❶ Page 28
" 'Do you not pay heed to the *sanbenitos* hanging here in the Hall of Impurity? Do you not think of the fate of the heretics and *Marranos* who wore them?' she [Dona Martinez] insisted, her voice growing shrill and pierced."

What is a sanbenito? What function do they play, hanging in the halls of the church?

❷ Page 83
"As I stared at the flowers, a vision flashed through my mind, a vision of two gardeners insane with hatred. They were out in their garden swinging their scythes, cutting down flower after flower in their very own garden. It was shocking to think that the gardeners were our very own kind and queen."

Why are the king and queen like the gardeners? What do the flowers represent?

❸ Page 100
" 'Then, there is the greatest challenge of all, which I have not yet explained, Isabel… Even if we manage to elude all Christian authorities, the hardest part will be convincing the Jewish ones themselves that we are truly Jews.'"

Why does Isabel's father cite this as "the greatest challenge of all?" Why would Jews be averse to accepting Marranos on their journey?

❹ Pages 193
" I am Ruth, who came to cast her lot with the Jewish people…'Where are your people?' he [Senor Levi] demanded with irritation.
I took another deep breath. 'You are my people,' I said."

In what ways is Ruth de Cojano like the biblical figure of Ruth? What parallels are there in their stories?

❺ Page 203
"She smiled and said, 'Indeed, we ourselves were weeping Jews many months ago when we began our chaotic flight from Toledo. Yet, as we went forward, we grew in strength and resolve to meet our fate with our heads held high… My husband, the rabbi, endlessly encouraged us to keep together and find some measure of joy in our new destiny."

According to Rubisa, about what can they be happy? How is this joy manifested on their journey?

IV. LESSON PLANS:

❶ Historical Simulation: Golden Age of Spain
Students will be responsible for researching the 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 during the "Golden Age" celebration. Students will simulate this historical period decorating the space with examples of art, serving food from the region, presenting a song or recording in Ladino, and read medieval Jewish poetry in the character of various Jewish poets.

Suggested resources from www.myjewishlearning.com:
- The Language of Mediterranean Jewry: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/Languages/Languages_TO_OtherLangs/Languages_Ladino.htm
- Sephardic Cuisine: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/food/Overview_Sephardic_Cuisine/Food_Med_Marks.htm
- Jewish Art in Medieval & Modern Times: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/Art/TO_ArtOverview/ArtHistory/ArtMedievalModern.htm

- Language and Poetry: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history_community/Medieval/MedievalCultureTO/Poetry.htm

❷ "As one large group of people passed, yet another marched around the long bend of the road. This time four young men linked arm in arm, their side locks bouncing gaily beneath their colorful caps, ignored the music up ahead and sang a stirring song of their own, as if shouting it to the heavens. I did not understand its words, but, of course, it had to Hebrew! I tried to hear the words as they spilled out in repetition, but could only catch the first few: '*Adon Olom Asher Molah, b'terem kol y'tseer niv'ro…*'" (Page 183)

Introduce the discussion by reading the above quote and the following short description of the prayer: The *Adon Olam* is a prayer depicting the unity and providence of God. It is usually recited at the end of a service. The authorship has been traditionally ascribed to Solomon ibn Gabirol, an 11th –century Hebrew poet who spent his life in Spain.

Using a siddur, read through the *Adon Olam* as a class. Use the following questions as a guide for a class discussion:

- What is the central idea of this prayer?
- What emotions does the author of the prayer describe?
- What images are used to convey these emotions?
- Why were the boys joyfully singing this prayer?
- In what ways would this prayer be a source of comfort and strength for them?

❸ Like the biblical narrative in *Shemot*, *The Cross by Day, the Mezuzzah by Night* is the story of an exodus. Like the Israelites in the desert, the Jews of Spain must cross a body of water to reach their freedom.

Examine the biblical text of the Exodus, paying particular attention to *Shemot* 14-17.

Connecting to the novel:

- What parallels can be drawn between the historical events in the novel and in the biblical text?
- What obstacles do the Jewish people face in preparing for their journey? What obstacles does Ruth have to overcome?
- How can the Ruth's story be understood as one of personal discovery and redemption?

IV. WRITING ACTIVITIES:

❶ Ask students to write a newspaper article about the plight of the Jews in Spain. The article should address the following questions: Why are the Jews leaving? Who are the key players involved in their expulsion? What are some of the reactions of the Christian community? The article should also include responses from member of the Toledo Jewish community about their experiences and plans for the future.

❷ Isabel is given a mezuzah by her father to symbolize her connection to her Jewish heritage. Ask your students to write a personal reflection on what single item they would pass along to symbolize their connection to Judaism. As an alternative, students can hypothesize what single item their parents or grandparents might pass on to them.

❸ Have students write a journal entry as if they were Isabel. Students should choose one of three points in the novel about which to write:

a) Isabel's feelings upon discovering her Jewish roots
b) After her father is taken away (and learning the extent of her brother's betrayal)
c) At the close of the novel, when she is getting ready to leave Spain for Turkey

❹ Personal research project:
Students will interview parents and write responses to the following questions:

a) What is the origin of your name? What is the meaning of your name?
b) In what ways do you think you embody elements of the person or qualities your name describes?

V. PROJECTS:

❶ Create a class map charting Ruth's journey. Using a map of Spain, pinpoint the location where she begins her journey, the port of Cadiz, and the direction of her final destination. Ask your students to try and tell the story of her journey using the map as a visual tool. Have your students create a legend and use paper cut-outs or other objects to enliven the map.

❷ *Mezuzah* case making:
"'It is the signpost of the Jewish home, Isabel, a tradition going back to ancient times, when the Jews were slaves in Egypt. A bit of parchment with Hebrew blessings is sealed within.'" (Page 39)

Steps for making clay *mezuzah* cases:

- Using *sculpey* clay or *fimo*, both available at craft stores, soften the clay and roll a sheet of clay out either by hand or using a pasta machine.
- Have students shape the clay as desired, leaving the top with an opening and the bottom closed (Put a hole in the top and bottom for hanging)
- Decorate the mezuzah using excess clay or paint
- Roll out a little clay to put the Hebrew letter Shin
- Bake as directed and, when cooled, coat with *Sculpey Gloss/Satin Clear Protection.*

To make *mezuzah* cases from fabric, check out http://www.babaganewz.com/archive/article.cfm?ID=22&STEP=resultsByDate&requestXY=Tishrei%205762 in the BABAGANEWZ archives.

❸ Identity collage: *The Cross by Day, the Mezuzzah by Night* is, among other things, a story of self-discovery. Throughout the course of the novel, Isabel comes to embrace her

true identity, that of Ruth de Cojano. 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.