The Storyteller's Beads
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 Storyteller's Beads by* Jane Kurtz. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept *herut* (freedom) addressed in the *Nisan* issue of BABAGANEWZ.

The Storyteller's Beads is a story of unlikely friendships, courage, a redemptive journey, and of new beginnings. The novel is told in two voices: those of Sahay and Rahel, two girls living in Ethiopia in the 1980s who, for different reasons, are forced to leave their homes. Sahay sets out for Sudan with no clear plan outside of the imperative that she must be the "hope for (her family's) future." Rahel embarks on a similar journey with *aliyah* and Jerusalem as the much-anticipated destination. At first wary of each other, the two girls learn to look past ethnic differences and preconceived notions and come to depend on one another. The novel culminates in an emotional and awe-inspiring airlift out of Ethiopia in a fictionalized account of Operation Solomon.

To help plan for the study of the novel, this guide offers:
- Questions for study and discussion
- Passages for close analysis
- Lesson ideas
- Writings 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:

Historical context:
1. When does the story take place? According to the author's afterword, "The True Story of Rahel and Sahay's Escape," what political and natural factors influenced the families' decisions to leave Ethiopia? (See pages 147–148.)

2. According to Ethiopian tradition, how did Judaism come to Ethiopia? (See page146)

3. What name did other ethnic groups in Ethiopia use to refer to the Beta-Israel and what is its' meaning? For what talent were the Beta-Israel known and why do you think this posed a threat to these other groups?

4. Who were the Kemant people and what was their religion?

Characters:

1. Why is Sahay, in her uncle's words, "the only hope for the future?" What happened to Sahay's family?

2. What caused Rahel's blindness? What activities constitute her daily life in the village?

3. What is Rahel's grandmother's status in the Beta-Israel community? In what ways does she serve as a teacher and mentor to Rahel?

Plot:

1. At the Beta-Israel meeting when they discuss the community's return to Israel, the community leader relates the story of the Exodus from Egypt. How is their upcoming journey similar to the biblical story of the Exodus?

2. Why are Rahel and Dawit forced to make the journey to Sudan without their family? (page 68)

3. How does Sahay become Rahel's guide mid-way through their journey? Why does Sahay characterize her action as a "strange gesture" and how does this comment reflect her general beliefs about the Beta-Israel?

4. What was Umm Rekuba and where was it located? What did Umm Rekuba look like and what were the living conditions like?

5. Why does Rahel tell the messenger that Sahay is her sister?

III. Passages:

1. Page 47

"The children did not look up from whatever game they were playing until [Sahay] was very close. *What did my uncle think might happen?* she asked herself nervously. They were only children, not like the men who had come crashing down on her house that day of the terrible running and shouting. Still, she began to walk more and more slowly, putting one foot carefully in front of the other. 'May God give you help for my sake,' she finally called to them. 'I need help and a little food.'

A little girl looked up and screamed. She jumped up and ran back to the village. '*Buda*," one of the boys cried out. 'Go away, *buda*.'"

What is the meaning of *buda*? Why do the other children call her this and why do they react in such a way? How does her uncle explain their name-calling?

2. Page 51

"'These beads will help you take something even more important,' Grandmother said. 'They are a storyteller's beads, and I give them to you for your journey. During the days until you go, I will tell you our stories. Every time you touch a bead, you must remember its story.' She guided Rahel's fingers to the first bead after the knot."

Why do you think the beads are, in Grandmother's words, "even more important?" What, in your opinion, is the significance of stories?

3. Page 131

"'The Kemant,' Sahay finally said, 'knowing all the things that can happen to a person's family, have ways for people to make new kin, not of one's own blood. People who are sisters and brothers by choice, not by kinship, are *mahala*. *Mahala* do special things for each other and talk about things they would never talk about with other people. They call each other by special names. So perhaps what you told the man is not a complete lie.'"

According to Sahay, what is the reasoning behind the Kemant concept of *mahala*? How does this statement mark a shift in how Sahay and Rahel relate to and understand each other?

4. Page 135

"'Where are we?' she asked. 'Is this Jerusalem?'
'I don't know,' Sahay said. She took Rahel's hand and rubbed it along the floor. 'Does this feel like Jerusalem?' she asked. 'What did your elders tell you?'
Rahel tried to think. She couldn't remember her elders saying anything about a giant fish."

What does this passage reveal about Rahel's understanding of *aliyah*? In her mind, how does she envision Jerusalem?

IV. Lesson Plans

1. Use the novel to explore the concept of *herut* as it relates to Exodus from Egypt.
The novel is particularly poignant at this point in the Jewish calendar because, like the story of the Exodus, *The Storyteller's Beads* is a novel of courage and redemption. Moreover, like the Israelites in Egypt, the wandering of the Ethiopian Jews in the desert is the starting point on their road to freedom.

Examine the biblical text of the Exodus paying particular attention to *Shemot* chapters 14 and 17.

Compare Chapter 17 in *Shemot* to the passage on page 104 that recounts Rahel's reaction upon their arrival in Umm Rekuba:

"They started down the hill. Rahel thought about Jerusalem. Was it only a dream? No, the elders had said that if they walked through the Sudan, they would get to Jerusalem. But could this be Jerusalem? This children of Israel—far away from the homeland in Egypt, out in the desert heat— had become angry with Moses. 'Have you brought us out into the desert to die?' they had shouted. But Moses struck a rock to find water for the people. And hadn't he found manna for them to eat?"

Connecting to the novel:

1. What parallels can be drawn between the settings of the novel and the biblical text?
2. What obstacles do the Jewish people face upon leaving Egypt? What obstacles do Rahel and Sahay encounter on their journey?
3. How does the story of the Exodus serve as inspiration to Rahel on her personal journey?
4. How can *The Storyteller's Beads* be seen as a story of personal transformation and redemption?

2. The Israeli musician, Shlomo Gronich founded the Sheba Choir in the 1980s. The choir is comprised of Ethiopian children and teens (ages 12–17) who perform around the world under Gronich's guidance. Their music combines native Ethiopian folk songs with an Israeli accent.

The following song from Shlomo Gronich and the Sheba choir recounts the journey from Ethiopia to the land of Israel. Read the translation of the lyrics (below) and listen to a clip from the song at www.jewishmusic.com. (Search for keyword Gronich, scroll down to click on "The Journey to Israel" to play the song in Hebrew. You may also choose to play the other audio files available from this CD.)

Hamasa L'Eretz Yisrael
The Journey to the Land of Israel
Words: Chaim Idissis
Music: Shlomo Gronich

The moon is watching from above
On my back is a light bag of food
The desert beneath me has no end ahead
And my mother promises my little brothers

"A little more, a little more
lift up your legs, a last push
towards Jerusalem"

The moonlight stood fast
Our bag of food was lost.
The endless desert
Cries of jackals
And my mother comforts my little brothers

"A little bit more, a little more
soon we'll be redeemed
we won't stop going
to the land of Israel"

And at night bandits attacked
With a knife and a sharp sword
In the desert, the blood of my mother
The moon is my witness and I promise my brothers

"A little bit more, a little more
The dream will be fulfilled
Soon we will arrive in the land of Israel."

In the moon the image of my mother looks at me
Mother doesn't disappear
If only she were by my side
she would be able to convince them
that I am a Jew.

Questions for discussion:

a) What instruments do you hear?
b) Describe the scene created in the song. What is the mood of the children? What is the attitude of the narrator?
c) What does the narrator mean, "If only she was by my side, she would be able to convince them that I am a Jew?" What does this tell us about the obstacles some faced trying to get to and upon arrival in Israel?

As a follow up, have students write a poem or short prose piece as if they were taking this same journey.

3. Throughout the novel, many Amharic (the language spoken in Ethiopia) terms are used. The following dictionary activity is intended to familiarize students with a few phrases in Amharic and to teach them about using context clues to decipher meaning.
To begin, reread the passage on pages 33–38 about the Beta-Israel meeting.
Provide each student with a piece of paper with the following words on it:

- *Injera*
- *Shifta*
- *Tukul*
- *Kes*
- *Baaltet*
- *Shamma*

Ask your students to write up a definition for each using their own words based on their understanding of the use of these terms in the novel; afterwards, compare their definitions with those from the glossary (beginning of page 151).

As a follow up, using the word list in Appendix A of common Amharic phrases, divide students into groups and have them practice saying these salutations.

4. The *Leader's Guide to The Family Participation Haggadah "A Different Night"* includes a short memoir of an American *oleh* (the founding director of Israel Association for Ethiopian Jewry) who was in Ethiopia on Pesach on the eve of an airlift. In his memoir, Micha Oddenheimer describes the parallels between the Exodus celebrated on Pesach and the Exodus of Jews from Ethiopia. His story is thought-provoking and emotional. Read the essay with your students and ask them to consider how they can incorporate a retelling of this story in their Pesach *Sedarim*.

5. Ask students to consider what they have learned about the Beta-Israel and brainstorm a list of obstacles they think that the Ethiopian Jews might face upon their arrival in Israel. List the obstacles and then assign one obstacle to every group of two or three students. Challenge them to brainstorm possible solutions for their given obstacle; invite them to share their solutions with the class. To follow-up, students may visit http://www.iaej.co.il/index.htm and read about how in fact some of the challenges have been confronted.

V. Writing Activities

1. Encourage students to research and write a newspaper article about Operation Solomon. Their articles must provide the basic facts about the secret mission: About how many Jews were still in Ethiopia at the time? When did Operation Solomon take place? How did the Israeli government arrange the airlift? How many people left Ethiopia at this time? Be sure to also include interviews with people who made the journey from Ethiopia to Israel.

2. Rewrite the story of Hirute and Nahomey (see page 83) using Rahel and Sahay's experiences as the basis for the narrative. In what ways is Rahel like Nahomey? In what ways is Sahay like Hirute? What aspects of the biblical story need to change to reflect Rahel and Sahay's journey?

3. Journal exercise: Write a journal entry, as if you were Sahay, upon your arrival in Israel. What are her fears and concerns and what dreams have allowed her to persevere despite those fears? What are her expectations now that she's reached this new country?

VI. Projects

1. Use the novel as a springboard to explore Ethiopian Jewish culture. Divide students into research groups based on different aspects of culture (e.g. music, art, clothing, food, literature, etc.). Ask students to research their given topic via the internet, books, encyclopedias, etc.

Prompt questions: What are the defining characteristics of the aspect of Ethiopian Jewish culture you researched? How did these traditions develop? How does the cultural tradition differ from American/Western culture? From general Ethiopian culture? What do you think accounts for the differences?

Each group should prepare a visual aid and oral presentation to present their findings to the class.

Curricular add-ons: see appendix B for recipe to make injera

2. Create a class map charting the travels of Rahel and Sahay. Ask your students to try and determine the location of key events from their journey. Students should star these locations and create a legend that explains what happened at each of these places.

3. Create a cartoon or other visual re-telling of one of Rahel's stories.

- Ask the students to number a piece of paper from 1 to 5 and on each line, to tell one of Rahel's stories in chronological order in five stages.
- Give each student a piece of paper and using a ruler, ask him or her to make five large squares along the width of the paper. In each square, students should draw another stage in the story that they composed in the previous step. If time permits, show the students examples of cartoons for inspiration.
- Then secure all of the cartoons into a booklet or binder, creating a book of class cartoons that students can reference as part of the classroom library.

For more information about Ethiopian absorption into Israel society and other resources about Ethiopian Jewry, see:
http://www.iaej.co.il/ (Israel Association on Ethiopian Jewry)
http://www.nacoej.org/ (North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry)
http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/dinur/Internetresources/ethiopian_jewry.htm (Hebrew University -- Jewish History Resource Center)

Appendix A

From the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews website (http://www.iaej.co.il)

Amharic is the language spoken in Ethiopia.
It has its own alphabet and is derived from Geez, an ancient language still used by Kessim (Ethiopian rabbis).
Below are a few simple words transliterated for easier pronunciation:

Amharic	English
Tenaystelign	Hello
Endemen adesh (f) Endemen aderk (m)	Good morning!
Endemenesh (f) Endemeneh (m)	How are you?
Dehena	I am fine
Semish Mun Know (f) Semich Mun Know (m)	What is your name?
Melkamqen	Have a nice day
Amasiginalo	Thank you
Minimadel	You're welcome
Melkamba'al	Happy Holidays

Editor's Note: To see the Four Questions for Pesach in Amharic, visit Pesach Central at http://www.babaganewz.com/holidays/index.cfm?cat=23&sub=pesachcentral.

Appendix B

INJERA (Flat bread)

Servings: 8

- 4 c Self-rising flour
- 1 c Whole wheat flour
- 1 tsp Baking powder
- 2 c Club soda

Combine flours and baking powder in a bowl. Add club soda plus about 4 cups water. Mix into a smooth, fairly thin batter. Heat a large, non-stick skillet. When a drop of water bounces on the pan's surface, dip enough batter from the bowl to cover the bottom of the skillet, and pour it in quickly, all at once. Swirl the pan so that the entire bottom is evenly coated, then set it back on the heat.

When the moisture has evaporated and small holes appear on the surface, remove the injera. It should be cooked only on one side, and not too browned. If your first one is a little pasty and undercooked, you may need to cook a little longer or to make the next one thinner. But, as with French crepes, be careful not to cook them too long, or you'll have a crisp bread that may be tasty but won't fold around bits of stew. Stack the injera one on top of the other as you cook, covering with a clean cloth to prevent their drying out.