



**WOMEN'S LEAGUE
FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM**
Orpah's List Fiction Selection 2014-2015

Study Guide

A Guide for the Perplexed
By Dara Horn

Ellen Kaner Bresnick, Chair, Program Activity Committee (PAC)

Wendy Smith writes in the *Washington Post*:

“...I should stress that anyone who cares about the art of fiction will want to read [Dara Horn’s] *A Guide for the Perplexed*. The central story is riveting and closely tied to debates about privacy and electronic surveillance. Massachusetts software designer Josie Ashkenazi has invented Genizah, a program that employs computers and mobile devices to automatically record everything users do, allowing them to access any moment in their past. This rather sinister system, which bears the Hebrew name for a synagogue’s storeroom for damaged books, has made 33-year-old Josie a very rich woman. It’s also made her older sister, Judith, “sick with envy.”

Synopsis

Dara Horn’s latest novel is an engrossing story with many narrative layers. Josie Askenzai is a brilliant young software designer whose program, Geniza, archives events in people’s lives. Josie is kidnapped while consulting at the Library of Alexandria (Egypt), so her older sister Judith – without any of Josie’s obvious gifts – moves into her sister’s home to help her brother-in-law care for her young niece. In this story of sibling relationships, the reader is drawn into a web of complex family harmonies and dis-harmonies: not just Josie and Judith’s, but of other sets of siblings associated with the Cairo geniza (a depository for old and discarded sacred books and Jewish documents from the middle ages through the early modern era) first discovered by Solomon Schechter.

Biographical Information

Dara Horn, Ph.D. in comparative literature from Harvard University (2006), was chosen by *Granta* magazine as one of America’s “Best Young American Novelists.” Her novels have received many prestigious awards: *In the Image*, a National Jewish Book Award (2003); *The World to Come*, National Jewish Book Award for Fiction (2007) and an Editors’ Choice in *The New York Times Book Review*; *All Other Nights*, Editors’ Choice in *The New York Times Book Review* and one of *Booklist*’s 25 Best Books of the Decade.

In 2012, her nonfiction e-book *The Rescuer* was published by *Tablet* magazine and became a Kindle bestseller. She has taught courses in Jewish literature and Israeli history at Harvard, Sarah Lawrence College, and City University of New York, and has lectured at over two hundred universities and

cultural institutions throughout North America and in Israel. She lives in New Jersey with her husband and four children.

Interviews with Dara Horn

http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/_blog/The_ProsePeople/post/interview-dara-horn-a-guide-for-the-perplexed/

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/143707/dara-horn-profile>

Reviews of *A Guide for the Perplexed*

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/dara-horns-guide-for-the-perplexed.html?
_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/dara-horns-guide-for-the-perplexed.html?_r=0)

<http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-guide-for-the-perplexed>

http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/a-guide-for-the-perplexed-by-dara-horn-is-beautifully-written-but-critically-overdone/2013/10/21/80a9345e-3470-11e3-8a0e-4e2cf80831fc_story.html

A Guide for the Perplexed

Study Guide Questions

This guide contains two kinds of discussion questions:

1. general questions about Dara Horn's *A Guide for the Perplexed*
2. questions that focus specifically on the **Mishpachah II** themes: Sarah: Complicated Family Dynamics; Ruth: Journeys; Mathilde: Community; Golda: Personal Sacrifice/Difficult Decisions

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. In her book, Dara Horn uses the title of the Rambam's classical philosophical work *The Guide for the Perplexed*.* Why does she use this daunting intellectual work as a subtext for her story? Throughout Josie's ordeal, she refers to her ragged copy of Maimonides *Guide* to help her understand her own situation – was it chance? Was it pre-ordained? Was she responsible? (pgs. 163-168 and 243-45). In this interesting narrative device, Josie becomes the student to whom Maimonides is writing.

The Guide for the Perplexed was written at the end of the twelfth century by Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides (Rambam), one of the giants of medieval Jewish law and thought. In this work, written as a lengthy discourse to a student, Maimonides strives to reconcile rational thought and Aristotelian philosophy with religious belief. In this major philosophical explanation of Jewish belief, he expounds on the nature of God and the rational foundations of Jewish belief and commandments. His discourse on Divine providence and human free will influenced all subsequent theologians, Jewish and Christian alike.

2. Why does the author use so many narrative voices? What does this add to the plot?
3. The Joseph story – in a modern retelling – is central to the plot. How and where does she do this? What is significant and interesting about the Joseph story that would lend itself to a modern version?
4. What other biblical stories can you find in the novel? Why do you think that Horn grouped these stories together? What do they have in common?
5. Why do you think Horn employs actual iconic figures like Schechter and Rambam ---and iconic locations like the Cairo Geniza? What difficulties might an author encounter using this narrative device, and how does Horn resolve those difficulties?
6. What is the significance of the names Josie and Judith?***

Judith, a hero from the Apocrypha bearing her name, is a daring and beautiful widow who is upset with her Jewish countrymen for not trusting God to deliver them from their

foreign conquerors. She goes with her maid to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, with whom she slowly ingratiates herself, promising him information on the Israelites. Gaining his trust, she is allowed access to his tent one night as he lies in a drunken stupor. She decapitates him, then takes his head back to her countrymen. The Assyrians, having lost their leader, disperse, and Israel is saved. Though she is courted by many, Judith remains unmarried for the rest of her life.

7. According to Horn, we create our own story through memory. What are the problems with this? What role does the Cairo Geniza play in this story? Why is this important?

The Cairo Geniza is a collection of Jewish manuscript fragments that were found in the storeroom (geniza) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat or Old Cairo, Egypt. They describe all manner of daily and religious life among Jews in the Middle East and North Africa from the 9th to the 19th centuries. The geniza comprises the largest and most diverse collection of medieval manuscripts in the world. The texts are written in various languages, especially Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic.

8. Nasreen dreams about her husband's funeral, and then insists that Josie interpret her dream. Why is she so insistent? Why are dreams such an important part of the book?
9. How does Josie apply the Rambam's notion of evil to her own situation?
10. How are the complicated relationships resolved?

Questions relating to the four themes for Mishpachah II: Lessons From Our Sisters

Each of these sets of questions focuses on different aspects of the book which can be tailored to one of these four topics. Decide when you want to use it – perhaps even more than once – and see how the story of Josie and Judith complements each subject.

I Sarah: Complicated Family Dynamics

1. How is the story about Josie in the pit so formative in her own life? How is it central to the Josie/Joseph narrative?
2. How would you describe Josie's relationship with her daughter? Does their relationship change as the book progresses? If so, in what way?
3. What do we learn about Schechter's background? How significant are these facts to this novel? Why is it important to know that he also was a twin? How can this help us to understand his background? How would you describe their relationships as children and then as adults?

4. The last line of chapter 1 says: *“This is the beginning, Judith’s first memory, and nothing else matters. All of the worlds before that moment might as well never have existed.”* The last line of the final chapter of the book says: *“This is the beginning, as Tali sees it, and nothing else matters. All of the worlds before it might as well never have existed.”*

How do these two quotes relate to each other? What is their significance? What do they illustrate about Judith and Tali?

5. There are many sets of siblings in this story. Who are they and how would you characterize their relationships? How would you compare them with each of the others?

Judith and Josie

Solomon and Srulik

Agnes [Lewis] and Margaret [Gibson]

Moses and David

Nasreen and Zulaika

Tali and Yael

In 1896, English the twin sisters [Agnes S. Lewis and Margaret D. Gibson](#) returned from Egypt with fragments from the geniza to show Solomon Schechter at Cambridge. Schechter immediately recognized the importance of the material. He went to Egypt to examine large cache of documents, taking many back to Cambridge, but most importantly bringing the contents of the of the geniza to scholarly attention.

II Ruth: Journeys

1. Why did Josie create the Genizah software? What did she learn about herself during her creation of the program and later during her captivity?
2. During her captivity, Josie spends many hours reading Rambam's *Guide for the Perplexed*. How did this book help her to cope with her captivity?
3. What is the effect on Josie when she realizes that her captors want her and not the ransom?
4. Why does Tali quote from the Book of Ruth? "*Hello Judith, you are my new mommy...I will listen to you forever. Wherever you go, I will go. You people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God.*" (p. 113-114)
5. Does Schechter's journey to Cairo parallel Josie's journey to Cairo?

III Mathilde: Community –Private and Extended

1. How would you describe Tali's life at home with both her parents, and then with her Aunt Judith and her father?
2. What is the effect of shiva on Itamar and on Judith? What do they learn about each other? What is significant about the fact that they learn these things during shiva week for Josie?
3. When Schechter enters the geniza, what is the effect on him? What kind of communities does he find in the geniza? How does he feel while working there? How does his scholarly world/community at Cambridge differ from that of his twin brother in Zikhron Yakov?
4. How would you describe Rambam's intersecting communities, the court and his home?
5. What was life like for the inhabitants of the City of the Dead? What is the effect of this on Josie and later on Judith?

IV Golda: Difficult Choices and Personal Sacrifice

1. What does Judith offer in caring for Tali? Why is this offer described as “the creation of a world”? (p. 104) What world is Judith creating?
2. Why do Itamar and Judith fight over taking Tali to the doctor when she is sick?
3. Why does Judith want forgiveness after she and Itamar have been intimate?
4. Why does Judith decide that she must go to Cairo to look for Josie?
5. What role do the Egyptian sisters Nasreen and Zulaika play in the story? What is their responsibility vis a vis Josie and Judith, and each other?
6. Forgiveness is an important theme in the book. In what contexts does it appear – who seeks forgiveness? Who grants forgiveness?
7. How is the act of forgiving often a difficult choice?