

AN EDUCATOR GUIDE TO

RUTH BEHAR

PURA BELPRÉ AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
LUCKY BROKEN GIRL

ACROSS
SO MANY
SEAS





★ **"POWERFUL AND RESONANT."**

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ **"A MOVING TALE."**

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ **"[A] LYRICAL NARRATIVE . . . HIGHLY RECOMMENDED."**

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

DEAR EDUCATOR:

Meet Benvenida, Reina, Alegra, and Paloma, four girls who each have a story to tell—and a song to sing! Ruth Behar's *Across So Many Seas* traces the journeys of these compelling characters and their families through different historical periods and places ranging from Spain and Turkey to Cuba and Miami, Florida. They are Sephardic Jews who take pride in their Spanish heritage and speak their own language, Ladino, which they carried with them to new lands after the expulsion from Spain. Each narrator describes being on the cusp of young adulthood and learning how to use her voice while navigating challenging situations around her. Snippets of song lyrics and precise historical details add to Behar's textured portrayals of each location. This novel asks profound questions about the basis of identity, the impact of prejudice, the meaning of friendship, and the ways we are constantly seeking home. Join these four girls on an unforgettable journey across time which reminds us that we're all connected—just as the sea connects all of us.

This educator's guide contains supplementary materials that can be customized to any classroom or lesson plan for a middle grade language arts curriculum. Arranged by the four sections of the novel, the sequential discussion questions encourage close reading and emphasize interpretation of motifs, analyzing literary devices, and tracing the arc of each character. The general discussion questions build connections between

the novel's sections, exploring broader themes like immigration, family, identity, and friendship; three extension questions offer opportunities for compare-and-contrast with other novels, as well as a chance to reflect anew on the historical turning point of 1492. The activities for further exploration give students a way to delve creatively into aspects of *Across So Many Seas*, for example by writing (and hiding!) their own poem, interviewing family members, or listening to a playlist of the real-life songs that inspired the novel's characters. Readers can browse a list of related titles and get to know Ruth Behar through a wide-ranging Q & A about her artistic process and the importance of engaging with Sephardic history.

Two additional resources have been included to facilitate in-depth learning about this novel's unique religious and cultural focus on Sephardic Jews. There is an explainer section about the Ladino language which includes a glossary of words in Ladino, Spanish, and other languages that appear in the book. Additionally, a list of Jewish religious terms provides helpful context about many of the traditions and beliefs that Behar references in the text.

We hope that this suite of materials provides a road map for teachers integrating Ruth Behar's latest book into their curricula. May your students' journey across many seas be fruitful indeed!

This discussion guide was developed by **Hannah S. Pressman**. She received her PhD in modern Hebrew literature from New York University, focusing on memoir, gender, and translation studies. Her latest research project explores her family history in Rhodes and Turkey, revealing the untold stories of Sephardic women. Currently she is the Director of Education and Engagement at the Jewish Language Project, a program of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Dr. Pressman has published widely on Jewish religion, language, and culture for a range of ages and audiences. She is a consultant and curriculum writer for PJ Library, which sends free Jewish children's books all over the world. As of 2023, Dr. Pressman is also codirector of the American Ladino League, which supports the community of Judeo-Spanish students and teachers in the United States.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DIVIDED BY SECTION

Part One (Toledo – Valencia – Naples – Constantinople) Benvenida, 1492

1. What are the orders given to Jewish people in the Spanish proclamation on p. 2? As a result, what choices are left for Benvenida's family in Toledo?
2. Benvenida says, "Poems come into my head all the time, and I usually try to write them down" (5). How does she use poetry to reflect on her friends' conversion to Catholicism? Compare the poem on pp. 4–5 to the poem on p. 60.
3. Benvenida's mother tells her, "Write, Benvenida, write; let your heart speak" (9). Why does Benvenida know how to read and write? Was this typical for girls her age in the fifteenth century?
4. "Even from the ends of the earth, I will remember where I came from" (11). Discuss this line as it applies to Benvenida (and upon completion of the novel—discuss how it applies to the other narrators as well).
5. What do you think motivated Benvenida to hide the parchment in the wall next to her house (18)?
6. What two things does Benvenida's father Samuel take with him from their house and community (19–20)?
7. "Now I can feel in my bones the meaning of that ugly word, *expulsion*" (27). List three details that illustrate how difficult the journey from Toledo was for the Sephardic Jews trying to leave Spain.
8. How do the innkeeper El Moro and his family treat the Jewish travelers? Contrast this with the way other Spaniards treated them on their journey. Why do you think El Moro behaves differently (36–39)? Similarly, the innkeeper at the port in Valencia is kind to Benvenida and her family (43–46). Why do you think that is?
9. When Benvenida and her family arrive in Naples, Italy, what are two ways the place immediately feels different (52–53)?
10. How does Tía Mazal initially respond to Benvenida's poetry writing? Why do you think she changes her mind (59–60)?
11. Shortly before leaving Naples for Constantinople, Benvenida says, "In the new land we'll hear the nightingales sing again" (66). Once she arrives in the Ottoman Empire, she promises herself, "I'll sing the old songs that came with me across the sea, and I'll sing them playing the oud" (68). What do you think gives her so much confidence?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: DIVIDED BY SECTION (Cont'd)

Part Two (Silivri – Havana) Reina, 1923

1. Reina and her parents have a discussion about “our Spanish” (meaning the Ladino language), which Papa is sure will be spoken “forever” (73). What is happening politically that makes Mima concerned about “our Spanish” being taken away?
2. Now that Reina is twelve, what has changed in the way she and her sisters interact with the boys next door? How does Reina feel about this shift?
3. Why are Papa and Mima worried during the parade celebrating the newly independent nation of Turkey (77)?
4. What do we learn about Reina’s personality from her decision to take her sisters outside to the courtyard after the parade (79)?
5. While speaking with Sadik, Reina starts comparing the roles of women in Judaism and Islam. What does she conclude about the meaning of freedom, and do you agree (80)?
6. As Sadik and Reina walk to see the fireworks, she sees “familiar faces” who make up her diverse neighborhood. What identities and faiths are included?
7. Throughout Part Two, Sadik hears Reina’s music through the walls (83, 87, 91, 101). What does the wall represent in this situation?
8. Despite the risks of the situation, why do you think Reina agrees to play a song on her mother’s oud (85)?
9. How does Reina’s father react on discovering her behavior on the night of the fireworks? Do you think her punishment is too harsh (93–94)?
10. Reina’s mother tells her, “Your reputation is tarnished here,” but also instructs her, “Once you are there [in Cuba], don’t look back, hijica” (95–96). How is Mima choosing to handle this moment of crisis for their family?
11. Even though Reina is “dead to him,” her father weeps for her “as he has wept for the ancestors who fled Spain during the expulsion” (97). Interpret the conflicting emotions felt by Reina’s father.
12. Why do Reina and Mima play music together during her last days in Turkey? How does Reina relate to the song “Tres ermanikas eran” (100)?
13. Mima tells Reina to take the extra house key “to remember that this will always be your first home in the world” (104). Does this remind you of another character’s actions in Part One?
14. Why does Tía Zimbul advise Reina to “throw your oud into the sea and leave all that mournful music behind” (107)?
15. How do Reina’s new Cuban neighbors react to her identity as a Spanish-speaking Turkish Jew (110)?
16. After meeting her future husband, Moshico, Reina plays the song “En la mar hay una torre” (“In the sea, there is a tower”) on her oud. What does the song reveal about how she is feeling?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: DIVIDED BY SECTION (Cont'd)

Part Three (Havana – Melena del Sur – Miami) Alegra, 1961

1. Alegra admits, “I know so little about my mother’s past.” Why does Reina finally decide, “It’s time I tell you more” (120)?
2. When we meet Reina again, what do we learn about the status of her estrangement from her Papa (121)? How has her marriage to the much older Moshico turned out (129)?
3. “So, Mama, you were born in Turkey, but you felt Spanish? Just like I was born here in Cuba but feel like I’m Turkish too?” (124) Discuss what Alegra is discovering about the many pieces of her identity.
4. Why does Alegra want to be a brigadista and “go teach people in the countryside how to read and write” (124–125)? In contrast, why are her siblings suspicious of the Cuban literacy campaign (135)?
5. “As long as there is honey for the baklava, there will be sweetness in our lives” (128). Are you surprised to hear this from Reina, who had declared in Part Two that she was born “carrying a bundle of sadness” (71)?
6. Alegra’s neighbors, Teresita, Carlos, and Caridad, honor their West African heritage. How does Alegra compare their customs to religious celebrations in her own family (132)?
7. Papá says, “I’ve grown to love this island as much as Turkey, but who knows if we might have to leave one day?” (135) Across the whole novel, what have the characters’ experiences taught you about the joys and the risks of believing you have found home somewhere?
8. Why is Moshico opposed to Alegra joining the literacy campaign, and how is he finally persuaded to let her go (140–141)?
9. What was Alegra’s experience of attending the assembly with Fidel Castro? Why does she call him “a man who can make us shout until we have no voice” (153)?
10. What does Teresita mean when she tells the old man in Melena del Sur, “The color of our skin may be different, but we’re both as Cuban as the palm trees” (161)? How does Alegra decide whether or not to reveal that she is turca in situations outside of her home?
11. Find three details that show the difference between living in the Cuban countryside versus living in Havana. Does Alegra enjoy the change of scenery?
12. Why is it hard for Alfredo to learn to write, and how does Alegra find a way to still teach him (172–173)?
13. When Alegra returns to Havana, her mother shares some alarming news. What happened to Papá, and why have her siblings suddenly left Cuba?
14. What is the significance of Papá taking down Mama’s oud and announcing, “It is time for you to sing again” (187)?
15. Alegra describes her first impressions of life in Miami in a letter to her parents. What are her worries, and what is surprising to her about life in America so far? (191)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: DIVIDED BY SECTION (Cont'd)

Part Four (Miami – Toledo) Paloma, 2003

1. Have you ever heard the music of Celia Cruz? Her work is honored at the Smithsonian Museum here: si.edu/spotlight/latin-music-legends-stamps/celia-cruz. Why is Paloma's father so set on saying farewell to her in person? (197)
2. How does Paloma personally connect to Celia Cruz's life, and what is particularly inspiring for her as someone who dreams of being a singer (200)?
3. Paloma declares, "I feel like I carry a lot of history on my shoulders. Not only were my ancestors driven out of Spain, but my abuela had to leave Turkey, and my parents had to leave Cuba. So many seas were crossed. So much had to happen before I could be born, here in this place" (201). What do you think Paloma means when she says she feels she carries history on her shoulders? Is that something you've ever felt?
4. Paloma and her mother Alegra express different opinions about their family's upcoming trip to Spain. What are each of their hopes or expectations, and why? (204)
5. What is the Ladino language? Did you know that languages can be classified as endangered? (208–209, 215)
6. Paloma asks her Abuela Reina, "But what is it that draws you and me to such mournful music?" What does Abuela reply? Can you think of another reason Paloma likes to play "these weepy Sephardic songs" (210)?
7. Abuela reveals that her mother had the last name Toledano, which connects the family to the Spanish city of Toledo. There, people of many faiths coexisted peacefully for centuries. What else does Paloma's research reveal about the city of her ancestors? What aspect of this history makes her feel "like a dove with broken wings" (212)?
8. Mari Luz, the tour guide at the Sinagoga del Tránsito, now a Sephardic Museum, tells her visitors, "The past is a lost country. You can only imagine it, like a dream" (223). Is this a strange statement for a museum guide to make, when the evidence of the past is all around her?
9. What is the surprise connection between Mari Luz and the Toledano descendants visiting her museum? (225)
10. "Now I realize there are the ghosts of those who left and the ghosts of the conversos too. We were once one people . . ." says Paloma (229). How has visiting Spain given her a different understanding of Sephardic identity?
11. What is the connection between Mari Luz's daughter Palomita and Benvenida, the narrator of Part One?
12. "Freedom. A home where we are welcome. And can also welcome others" (235). What do you think of Paloma's definition of what ties her to the ancestors from long ago? How is this meaningful to you?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL

1. Each of the four narrators has a name drawn from Ladino, with a meaning: Welcome, Queen, Happy, and Dove. However, each character is also called “hijica” or “mi niña,” Spanish words for “daughter” or “my girl.” Discuss how each of the four main characters navigate between their identities as members of a family while also being citizens of the cities and larger societies around them. How does each “hijica” start to make a name for herself outside of her family?
2. *Across So Many Seas* centers on stories of immigration and what it means to “start over” in a new place. Find three examples in the novel where a character expresses the difficulty of being a refugee, leaving home, or finding a new home. Identify where each character is situated geographically, as well as emotionally, in the text. (**Hint:** To help understand the characters’ journeys, you could start by closely analyzing their dialogue and the responses of the people around them.)
3. Compare what the sea symbolizes (represents) to the narrator of each section. Would you call the sea another character in this novel?
4. Choose four of the symbols listed below and discuss their significance in *Across So Many Seas*. Be sure to mention if a symbol from one part shows up in another part!



Photo of an oud. Credit: John Doe Wikimedia Commons Public Domain

Part One: Samuel’s key, Benvenida’s tambourine, Amina’s handkerchief

Part Two: Mima’s oud, Reina’s key, the wall between Reina and Sadik

Part Three: Mamá’s (and then Alegra’s) Star of David necklace, Teresita’s Yemayá statuette, mangos

Part Four: Paloma’s Star of David necklace and her lucky eye charm, Abuela Reina’s keys, the statue of Lorca, Benvenida’s parchment

5. “Even from the ends of the earth, I will remember where I came from” (11). Discuss how this sentence (spoken by Benvenida in Part One) applies to each of the four main characters and the ways they relate to their Sephardic family history.
6. “I am a girl who wants to be free,” says Reina on p. 89. Contrast this with her daughter Alegra’s statement on p. 150: “I’m so thankful for my freedom. And that I am able to fight for a cause I believe in.” Are the two generations saying the same thing? Why or why not?
7. Throughout the book we see relationships between different generations. Benvenida, Reina, Alegra, and Paloma are close to their mothers, and Paloma is close to her grandmother who is almost like a friend to her. What does each girl learn from these relationships? We also see strong friendships, bitterly lost, as with Benvenida and Susanah and Deborah, or fondly remembered, as with Reina and Sadik. What does friendship mean in the story and how do friends hurt or console one another?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: GENERAL (Cont'd)

8. **Extension question:** Compare *Across So Many Seas* with Ruth Behar's previous novel, *Letters from Cuba* (Penguin Random House, 2020). While *Across So Many Seas* explores the Sephardic Jewish experience from the point of view of four girls, Benvenida, Reina, Alegra, and Paloma, living in four time periods and in four different places, *Letters from Cuba* focuses on the Ashkenazi Jewish experience from the point of view of just one girl, Esther, who makes the journey from Poland to Cuba on the eve of WWII in the hope of working hard to save her family. What do you think of the different styles and formats of these books? What do you learn about the diversity of Jewish cultures and languages from reading the two books together?
9. **Extension question:** Compare *Across So Many Seas* with Alan Gratz's *Refugee* (Scholastic, 2017). Both of these novels examine the experience of displacement—of losing your home and having to find a new one. And both novels are written from multiple points of view. You have to read them to the end to see how all the stories come together. What do you think of how these books represent refugees and immigrants? Did you find their writing styles exciting to read because you had to read to the end to figure out the puzzle of how all the protagonists connect?
10. **Extension question:** What did you know about the major transformations that took place in the year 1492 before reading this book? (Refer to pages 238–239 of the Author's Note for more information.) How has your understanding of the history of this date changed?

The Ladino Language

Sephardic Jews trace their roots to Spain and view their centuries of peaceful coexistence there as “a golden age.” When they were expelled in 1492, they immigrated to lands around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. This community has historically spoken Ladino, also called Judeo-Spanish. Based on medieval Castilian, Ladino picked up elements of many other languages spoken in the places where Sephardic Jews lived, such as Arabic, Turkish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Greek. Today Ladino is considered a highly endangered language and has fewer than 100,000 speakers around the world. Researchers and community leaders are working together to preserve the spoken and written traditions of this beautiful language. The next page is a glossary containing Ladino and other languages that appear in *Across So Many Seas*.

See an example of Ladino in solitreo writing [here](#).



Ruth Behar's Abuela circa 1936

Glossary

Across So Many Seas reflects Ruth Behar's Cuban-Turkish-Ladino-Spanish-English upbringing (and she also heard Yiddish on her maternal side). The words in this glossary are representative of the different varieties of Spanish Ruth heard growing up in her family and surrounding environments. Some of the words in this list are exclusively Ladino, while readers might notice that some of the vocabulary is also part of Spanish, perhaps with minor spelling differences. In some cases, it's not always possible to distinguish between Spanish and Ladino given that there is so much overlap between these linguistic varieties.

adiós – goodbye

alegra – happy, or to bring happiness [Alegra: name of protagonist in Part Three]

alfabetizar – to teach the alphabet

benvenida – welcome [Benvenida: name of protagonist in Part One]

berenjena(s) con miel – eggplant(s) with honey

bizkocho(s) – ring-shaped cookie(s) topped with sesame seeds; bizkochikos are smaller versions

borekas – turnover-style pastries often featuring potato, cheese, or spinach, like an empanada

buen día, buenos días – good day, hello

buen viaje – have a safe trip (literally: good voyage)

bulemas – spiral-shaped pastry made of thin phyllo or similar dough, rolled around a savory filling

converso(s) – Jews who hid their religion and practiced Catholicism publicly while still observing Judaism in secret

dolmas – grape leaves, typically stuffed with rice and meat

dulce – sweet

El Dio – God

nuestro Dio – our God

fez – style of hat, typically red and traditionally worn in Morocco and Ottoman countries

gracias – thank you

hemos llegado – we have arrived

hermanica(s) – little sister(s)

hermano – brother

hijica – daughter, also used to mean “girl”

hijico – son, also used to mean “boy”

—ico, —ica – affectionate ending on a name, such as Samuelico

kal – synagogue; it is a shortened version of “kahal,” the Hebrew word for “congregation”

kaminos de leche i miel – paths of milk and honey; this is a Ladino expression to wish someone a good journey

karpuz – watermelon

kismet – Turkish word for fate

mashallah – an Arabic expression that means “God willing” or “With God’s blessing,” used to convey protection, agreement, and good luck

mazal bueno – good luck; an expression that combines a Hebrew word (mazal) with Spanish (bueno)

mazapanes de almendra – almond marzipan, a sweet paste of crushed almonds popular in Sephardic desserts

niña (mi niña) – girl, my girl

paloma – dove [Paloma: name of protagonist in Part Four]

querida – dear, loved one

reina – queen [Reina: name of protagonist in Part Two]

te kere mucho – he/she loves you

tía – aunt

tío – uncle

todo bien – it’s fine (all is well)

vestido – garment, dress

vejita – sweet (depending the context), old lady

vida larga – long life

Jewish Religious / Magical / Ritual Words

Here are some of the Jewish traditions and concepts that are mentioned in *Across So Many Seas* if you would like to understand them in more depth.

Evil eye – an age-old belief, observed in many cultures around the world, which centers on the idea that an evil eye is always watching enviously and has the power to curse one's success or happiness. Judaism has specific customs to ward off the evil eye, including charms, amulets, and saying “tfu tfu tfu.”

Haggadah – collection of texts that narrate the story of the Exodus from Egypt, for navigating the Passover Seder; the word “Haggadah” means “telling” in Hebrew.

Kaddish – traditional prayer recited in memory of the dead

Kippah – head covering, also called a yarmulke

Kosher – following Jewish dietary laws

Manna – According to the Book of Exodus, this is a divinely-sent food that the Israelites ate in the desert after fleeing slavery in Egypt.

May his/her memory be a blessing – an honorific said to praise someone who has passed away; it is a translation of the Hebrew phrase zikhrono(-a) livrakha.

Menorah – candelabrum with seven or nine total branches, the latter used for lighting Hanukkah candles over an eight-night winter holiday. One of Judaism's most ancient symbols.

Mezuzah – small box, which can be plain or decorative, affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes. The small parchment scroll inside the mezuzah includes the Shema prayer and verses from Torah. [See an example of Mezuzah here.](#)

Passover – springtime festival celebrating the Exodus from Egypt, including a ritual meal called the seder which centers on eating matzah and drinking four glasses of wine.

Shabbat – the Jewish Sabbath, a sacred day of rest that begins at sundown on Friday and concludes at sundown on Saturday

Shabbat candles – two candles are lit, traditionally by women, to usher in the Sabbath

Shofar – ram's horn blown during the Jewish high holidays, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

Star of David – ancient Jewish symbol, known as “magen David” (shield of David) in Hebrew, which appears in synagogue architecture and decorative contexts. Jewish people have been forced to wear it on their clothing during periods of persecution.

Tallit/Prayer Shawl – fringed ritual garment for prayer, classically worn only by men, but also worn by girls and women by the twentieth century.

Torah – This word can mean “a teaching” as well as the Five Books of Moses, the scripture at the heart of Jewish faith and learning

Tree of Life – a translation of the Hebrew phrase “etz chaim”; sometimes used to indicate the Torah

Yad – Hebrew for “hand,” this is the word for an elongated pointer, typically made of silver, that a reader uses to mark their place when chanting from the Torah. These ritual objects were often designed with one end looking like a fist with a pointing index finger. [See an example of Yad here.](#)

Activities For Further Exploration

1. Reina tells her daughter Alegra, “. . . our songs helped us hold onto the memory of the home we lost” (124). To access an interactive playlist for this novel, go to [Ruth Behar’s website](#) and listen to these songs, each cued to the part of the book where they are mentioned. Then, write a reflection that focuses on the lyrics of one of these songs, and explain how the song connects to what is happening in the story.
2. Interview a family member about their immigration history. If they are comfortable being recorded, you can record the interview as a voice memo on your phone, or speak over a Zoom chat or FaceTime. Here are some tips from Ruth in the Q & A: “However you get started, keep on going and be patient and follow the twists and turns of the story. To be a good storyteller you must begin by being a good storylistener.” Below are some questions you could ask:
 - Where does our family come from?
 - Did you experience immigration yourself, or did you hear stories about immigration from other family members?
 - Do you have any treasured items at home that come from another place? What does this item mean to you?
3. Here’s a traveling poem exercise. Tía Mazal tells Benvenida, “Wherever you go, your poems can travel with you” (60). Have you ever felt that way about writing?
 - **Assignment Part One:** Take a piece of paper and write a poem. If a poem doesn’t come to you, jot down something that you’re thinking about, or a question that’s been bouncing around your head. Fold up the paper and hide it in a pants pocket or jacket.
 - **Assignment Part Two:** On a separate piece of paper, list all the places that the paper gets to visit as you go about your day.
 - **Follow-up assignment:** Write a paragraph reflecting on what it felt like to carry your words with you for a day. Did you feel proud, or like you had a secret? Did you add anything to the paper during the day?
4. *Across So Many Seas* gives a voice to girls at different points in history. Write a short biography of a girl living in a different time and place than you. How much education did she acquire? What were her challenges? What might she have been able to achieve or not achieve because of her gender?



Vintage postcard of women playing the oud. Courtesy of Rachel Beckles Wilson and Oudmigrations

Supplementary Texts

For further exploration, these titles are recommended:

Ruth Behar, *Lucky Broken Girl* (Penguin Random House, 2017) - Read Ruth's autobiographical novel to learn about her own immigrant journey from Cuba to New York and how she found resilience after a car accident left her bedridden. Her Sephardic grandmother, Abuela, makes a cameo appearance (136–137).

Ruth Behar, *Letters from Cuba* (Penguin Random House, 2020) - Follow the journey of Esther, a Polish Jewish girl who escapes the dangers of Nazi-occupied Europe and makes a new home in Cuba.

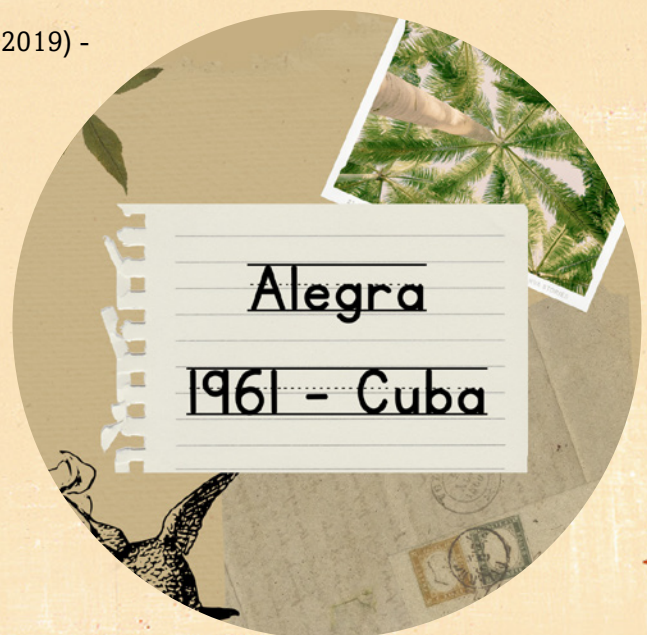
Ruth Behar, *Tía Fortuna's New Home: A Jewish Cuban Journey* (Knopf, 2022) - This vibrantly illustrated children's book, set in contemporary Miami, shows the relationship between young Estrella and her Sephardic aunt, who is leaving her beloved casita, a cottage on the beach, and bringing along memories of Cuba as well as food, customs, and language.

Alan Gidwitz, *The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog* (Puffin, 2016) - This fantastical story, set in medieval France, has a lot to say about religious tolerance.

Gail Carson Levine, *A Ceiling Made of Eggshells* (Harper, 2020) - If you are curious about the life of girls like Benvenida, you'll love this story about a girl named Loma living in Spain before the expulsion.

Leah Sokol, *The Spanish Plot* (Judaica Press, 2019) - This interactive choose-your-own-adventure book takes place in 1492 in Toledo, Spain.

Alan Gratz, *Refugee* (Scholastic, 2017) - A gripping middle grade novel about the harrowing journeys of three young people—Josef, a Jewish boy living in 1930s Nazi Germany; Isabel, a Cuban girl in 1994, a time of riots and unrest; and Mahmoud, a Syrian boy in 2015, escaping violence with his family—and how each finds courage in their quest for home.



Credit: Miranda Garcia

Questions and Answers with Ruth Behar



1. *One of the most striking things about your new novel is how it moves across such a wide expanse of time and geography. Did you start out wanting a really broad canvas?*

I looked over my very first notes for the book. I wrote them in February 2020. I am able to confirm that yes, from the beginning, I wanted a really broad canvas for this novel. Below are the words I wrote down that set me on the path toward telling a story of four girls, in four different times, in four different places—

In each generation, a twelve-year-old girl is caught in the web of history:

Something all share – the dream of a just, tolerant world . . .

The words of a lost song . . .

A need to forgive . . .

The bonds of family . . .

And a heritage of seeking freedom that goes back five centuries to Spain . . .

2. *On a related note, was the research process for this book more challenging than usual because you were portraying so many different settings?*

It was challenging but also exciting to be researching different times and settings. I had all kinds of books scattered around my desk—books about the Inquisition, books about Toledo, books about the traditions of Sephardic Jews, books about the literacy campaign in Cuba, Sephardic cookbooks. And there was so much information I looked up online, everything from the stories of Turkish women preserved in the Centropa site (<https://www.centropa.org/en>) to Fidel Castro’s speeches. And sometimes I’d listen to Sephardic love songs, or call my Tía Fanny to hear her stories about Cuba. I was awash in history—crossing the seas of time as much as the seas of place.

3. *Music plays an important role in Across So Many Seas, linking one era to another. Do you have a favorite Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) song, either one that was included in the book or one that you didn’t get to include?*

There are so many beautiful songs in the Ladino repertoire. It’s difficult to choose just one. I am drawn to the spiritedness of the song that is a joyful prayer of thanks, called “Bendigamos” (“May we bless”), which I include in the book. And the love song that is at the heart of the book, “En el mar hay una torre” (“In the sea, there is a tower”), touches my heart with its vivid image of a girl alone in a tower at sea calling to the sailors. The song “Adio Kerida” is one I have known and enjoyed for a long time, so much so that I made a documentary film entitled

“Adio Kerida.” Though on the surface, it’s a song about saying goodbye to a lost love, it can be interpreted as a goodbye to Spain, the country that was lost by the Sephardim but never forgotten.

4. *You say in your Author’s Note that Letters from Cuba, your previous YA novel (2020), was based on your maternal grandmother Baba’s life, while Across So Many Seas is a tribute to your paternal grandmother, Abuela Rebeca. Baba had shared some of her stories directly with you while you were growing up, but for your Abuela, you had a lot less information to go on. Can you share what it was like to try and create/imagine a family member’s history out of a faint outline?*

Abuela Rebeca went to Cuba all by herself as a young woman, leaving behind her sisters and brother and her parents, who she never saw again. We know that she brought along an oud and sang love songs in Ladino. And we know that a marriage had been arranged for her, but it didn’t work out, and later she met Abuelo Isaac, the man who would become my grandfather. That was all the information I had. So I started to wonder what might have happened that led to her sea crossing. It occurred to me that she might have had a falling out with her father. Did he send her away out of anger and shame? Could be . . . Once that idea came to me, I was able to imagine that the conflict with her father would have to do with her desire for freedom and his need for her to act like a traditional Sephardic girl who obeyed his every command. Somehow it all came together in my imagination, and though it’s fiction, the story felt real to me.

5. *Do you have suggestions for readers who might want to ask their parents or grandparents to share stories about their past? For people who are wondering, “Where do I even start?”—what’s a good way to start?*

Great question! It’s good to start informally, chatting with parents and grandparents over tea and cookies, when there’s quiet, and no one is rushing to go somewhere or to check their phones. One way to begin a conversation about stories from the past is to pull out old photos that might be in an album or perhaps all mixed up together in a box, and ask about the people in the pictures, who they were, what they were like, what is known about their lives. You can ask your parent or grandparent if they have a keepsake that’s important to them and talk about the story it holds. And there are many stories about holiday foods and family recipes that can open a door into the world of the ancestors. However you get started, keep on going and be patient and follow the twists and turns of the story. To be a good storyteller you must begin by being a good storylistener.

6. *This novel centers the voices of four young female characters. Why was that narrative structure important to you?*

I love stories told from multiple points of view and thought I’d challenge myself and see if I could tell such a story. And multiple points of view would allow me to step into the lived history of Sephardic journeys. By giving voice to four characters living in four times and four places, I could show how Sephardic Jews experienced multiple displacements and became part of different diasporas all over the world. Finally, I was mirroring what I know of my own

family history—which is that the ancestors were from Spain and then their descendants found their way to Turkey, Cuba, and the United States.

7. *As a writer, how did you imagine yourself into the minds of Benvenida, Reina, Alegra, and Paloma—did you drink a different flavor of tea or listen to a different kind of music each time you switched between sections?*

Actually, I only drank ginger tea with honey, and sometimes I sang the songs aloud that I included in the book, or listened to recordings, but I tended to work in silence. I was writing during the pandemic, so the world felt very scary. It felt comforting to retreat into my imagination and enter into the minds of Benvenida, Reina, Alegra, and Paloma, each experiencing a different expulsion, an ending, and looking for a new beginning.

8. *How is the history of Sephardic Jews relevant to people today?*

I think the history of Sephardic Jews is relevant today as we confront the vast immigrant crisis that is taking place around the world. Millions of people have had to leave their homelands and start anew. Also, many refugees and immigrants have been deported, which is a modern form of expulsion. The search for home that is at the heart of the Sephardic experience throughout history is something that so many people, regardless of their cultural or religious background, can identify with today.

9. *Can you talk a little more about how the Sephardic experience resonates with the contemporary Latino/a experience? As an artist, is it important to you to build bridges between the Jewish community and the Hispanic community?*

I think there are many connections between the Sephardic experience and the Latina/Latino experience. First of all, some of us, like me, are both Sephardic and Latina. I was born in Cuba, grew up speaking Spanish in the United States while struggling to learn English, and went through an acculturation process very similar to that which Latinx immigrants go through when they cross over. On a more general level, the Sephardic experience of losing a home in Spain, but holding on to the language and songs and memories of that lost home, resonates with the contemporary Latina/Latino experience of preserving the cultures of places left behind in the quest for a better life elsewhere. Also, we need to keep in mind that many people in the Latinx community may have Sephardic ancestry, as researchers have found to be true in the American Southwest. So yes, I think it is important for me as an artist to build bridges between the Jewish community and the Latinx community. Our communities have so much in common, including a shared ancestry, and an ability to carry our homes with us from place to place.



Photo of Toledo skyline Credit: Ruth Behar