

**Only the Lonely**  
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Last week on Monday afternoon, a woman approached me on the Q train. A little older than I; very put together. “Excuse me,” she said, “I’m not Jewish, but I just want to let you know that I support you.” I looked up from the book I was reading and returned something between a nod and a furrowed brow. I guess I wanted to implicitly communicate that I didn’t have enough information to ascertain whether she was crazy or sane. “Israel,” she said. “I want you to know that I support Israel. It’s so obvious, but the world can’t see it. I know you know.”

I was beginning to suspect that may have been playing with a few cards short of a full deck and then she said, “I look forward to seeing you on Saturday.”

“At The Jewish Center?” I said.

“No,” she said. “At the royal wedding.”

I thanked her for her good wishes. And then I thought of her words of support each morning as I read the news.

- Why can’t the world see it?
- Why can’t others celebrate the fulfilment of a decades-old promise to finally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel?
- Why can’t others understand the need for a sovereign nation to ensure that its borders aren’t breached by rioters intent on harming innocents?
- Why can’t others appreciate the difference between a democratic nation vying for peace and a terror group agitating for war?

To be so maligned and so misunderstood leaves those of us who love Israel feeling very much alone in the world.

On this joyous holiday of Shavuot there seems to be such a yawning chasm between the world that is and the world that ought to be. Is there some message – some Jewish response – that’s called for in moments like these?

To celebrate Matan Torah, it’s always our practice to study Torah on Shavuot. And so I’d like to do some learning with you while keeping one eye trained on this feeling of exasperation which doesn’t seem to be going away.

What I’d like to do this morning is propose a new frame within which to understand the book of Ruth and its characters. We usually think of chesed as the animating feature of the book. And of course it is. But I want to suggest an alternate lens through which to see the story. I want to make the case that the four chapters of the Megillah chart the specific malady of loneliness in the experience of each of the central characters – and then the improbable resolution of that loneliness.

In chapter one, it's plain to see. Naomi is unquestionably the object of focus. We begin with a family of four: Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons. But by the time we're five verses into the chapter, all the men are dead and Naomi is the sole survivor. Far from home, she's widowed and bereft of her children. The operative presumption is that her Moabite daughters-in-law will remarry Moabite men and Naomi will be left utterly alone. And yet the Megillah surprises us. No one could have anticipated that a foreigner would cut her ties with her ancestral homeland and venture off to a nation to which she doesn't belong. And yet Ruth declares that her attachment to Naomi is unbreakable. We all know her famous words:

עִמָּךְ עָמִי, וְאֵלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי.

But the conclusion of her soliloquy is even more remarkable:

כִּי הִמְנֹת, יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ.

It's not just a promise to accompany Naomi until she reaches the land of Israel; it's a promise that only death can separate them from one another. The depth of Naomi's loneliness is matched only by the breadth of Ruth's compassion.

In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to Ruth herself. She's the paradigmatic outsider at a time when xenophobia is the prevailing ethic. Just the sight of Ruth elicits murmurings. By implication, it's clear that if not for Boaz's warning, Ruth would have been the subject of discrimination in the fields of Bethlehem. Even among the destitute she has no place; she doesn't glean with the group of gleaners but follows them. What are the chances she would end up in the field of a righteous man? What are the chances someone would take notice of her? It's not just that Boaz deals kindly and generously toward Ruth. All of his gestures ensure that she is not alone. She can drink from the water drawn by the young men in the field. She can eat with the harvesters.

מִדְּוַע מִצְּאֵתִי הֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְהַכִּירֵנִי--וְאַנְכִי, נִכְרִיָּהּ.

Boaz, Ruth declares, has transformed her. The archetypal outsider now occupies a place on the inside.

Chapter 3 is about the third character in the book. The Megillah goes out of its way to create a scene in which Boaz is himself all alone. Until now we've only seen Boaz in relation to other people – in conversation with his foreman or with Ruth. We would never conceive of him as a man suffering from loneliness. But this is precisely how the Megillah wants us to see him. Who sleeps alone on a threshing floor? A man with no family; a man with no home. In fact, the Gemara (Bava Batra 91a) goes so far as to say the Boaz himself had lost his wife and children. And then out of nowhere, Ruth arrives and subtly suggests that Boaz need not be alone any longer.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, the narrative cleverly returns us to Naomi. And this is my favorite part: Lest we become distracted by the story's fairytale ending, the text reminds us that Ruth's marriage comes at a cost. Now that she's attached herself to Boaz, she is – almost by definition – detached from her former mother-in-law.

There are three protagonists in this story. If two form a couple, the third is literally the odd one out. Almost inherently, we should have to suffer the consequences of the story's denouement.

It's the price we the readers pay. To relish the moment in which Boaz and Ruth come together is to acknowledge that their union comes at the expense of the companionship between Ruth and Naomi.

And here the Megillah offers a brilliant and magnificent resolution.

וּתְקַרְאָנָהּ לוֹ הַשְּׂכֵנֹת שֵׁם לְאִמֶּר, יֵלֵד-בֵּן לְנַעֲמִי;

All the townspeople declare that a child had been born to Naomi. Naomi is not alone because she's become the adoptive mother of the infant son born to Ruth and Boaz.

How extraordinary. Literarily, there shouldn't be enough characters in the story to accommodate the endemic loneliness that pervades the text. But when individuals step up to alleviate the loneliness of others, more literal and emotional life gets created.

To those within its grasp, loneliness feels like a life-sentence. It's almost impossible to envision how things could change. The Book of Ruth is a poignant reminder that loneliness can end just as abruptly as it began; the human heart can open just as quickly as it closed. And more often than not, the resolution comes just at the moment when we would least expect it.

It's stunning to notice that all the people who help alleviate the loneliness of others in the Megillah are all individuals who are suffering from loneliness themselves! It's a virtuous circle the results of which create not only new bonds, but new life, new hope and the prospect of something transcendent.

הֵן עָם לְבָדֵד יִשְׁכֵן וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב

That the nations of the world condemn us or treat us like a pariah is par for the course. The question is how we respond.

In a few moments we're going to recite Yizkor. If we're saying Yizkor, it's because we've suffered a loss that's left us feeling more alone in the world. Looking around this room, there are people saying Yizkor for parents, siblings, spouses and even children. What we wouldn't give for a few moments more with the people we loved.

But lonely people are also endowed with a gift: the capacity to understand loneliness and empathize with those who suffer from it.

So each of us in fact uniquely positioned to be a Ruth, a Boaz or a Naomi in the life of another person. Each of us can begin a virtuous circle by being present for someone else. On this holiday when we accept anew the yoke of Torah, let's accept, too, the implicit responsibility to combat the loneliness around us: A call, an email, a visit, a text message, an invitation for a Shabbat meal. Our gestures can come in all kinds of forms.

When it comes to our community:

- we should be thinking of the people in this room;
- we should be thinking of the people not in this room;
- and we should be thinking of our friends and family in Israel.

Oftentimes the only thing standing between a person and that lonely feeling – is us.