

Shavuot Yizkor 2021

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There is often something abrupt at holiday services when we make the transition from the joyous Hallel psalms into Yizkor. While Yom Kippur has a somber tone, the three pilgrimage festivals, and especially Sukkot, are associated with *simchah*, happiness and celebration. And yet we feel the wisdom of the medieval addition of Yizkor on these festivals, as these are times when we especially miss the presence of our loved ones. Sukkot follows the High Holy Days with its vivid memories of holidays spent together, whether as children with our parents or as adults with our spouses. On Passover it is the seder with its empty chair that draws the absence of our loved ones to the front of our minds. But what about today's holiday, Shavuot, with its relative lack of special observances and vivid customs?

For me it is not so much the giving of the Ten Commandments that connects Shavuot to Yizkor as the secondary reading for the holidays, the Book of Ruth. By the middle of the first chapter, when we first meet Naomi, she is subdued and depressed. Having lost both her husband and her two sons, she renounces her very name, Naomi, which means pleasantness. Through the text we walk the path of Naomi's three-stage journey from a place of grief, centered on herself, to a turning outward in appreciation of Ruth's devotion, and eventually toward actively caring for her daughter-in-law and taking steps to secure her future.

At the end of the book, Naomi is holding her daughter-in-law's son, whom she considers her full grandchild though there is no blood relationship. The focus on the baby is not as a replacement for those Naomi has lost, but as a sign of the future.

Each of us is somewhere along Naomi's journey. Whether we are saying Yizkor for a loved one this evening for the first or second time, or for the 30th or 50th or even the 100th time. For some, our pain may still be so deep or fresh that our world remains small and constricted. Others may have begun to lift our eyes and to notice those who are caring for us, beginning to feel gratitude and express appreciation. And for some there will be a third step, as that gratitude transforms into service to others, keeping our loved one's memory alive in acts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasidim*.

Naomi did not expect Ruth to be the door opening to a fuller future, nor did she at first welcome Ruth's intrusion into her world of loss and bitterness. But Naomi's ultimate return to a life of pleasantness came in this unlikely way.

That is why we are urged to remain open, to recognize that help may come from an unexpected source or in unexpected ways. Lifting up our eyes to the mountains, we are encouraged to open them to wider vistas and unlikely people.