



On the periphery OF SOCIETY

BY LEONARD CARR



Lessons from Naomi and Ruth about how to treat others

THE JEWISH PEOPLE, HAVING DESCENDED FROM Abraham and Sarah, are a nation of converts. Our identity as a discrete nation was forged through deliverance from being the foreigners in an alien land. We are commanded to remind ourselves daily about the history that defines our national identity. Keeping close to this knowledge is the key to making our lives an expression of our deepest humanity. It is through keeping our ancestral memories of being the outsider alive that we can remain attuned and responsive to humanity of those that we do not naturally indentify as being part of us.

The Book of Ruth should speak to and touch deeply the very essence of who we are as individuals, and as people who define ourselves by this sensibility. The implicit narrative in the Megillah of Ruth is about bereavement, loss, displacement, and being a stranger. It is equally a story

about kindness, mercy, compassion, and hosting – qualities that represent the pinnacle of human dignity.

Through the loss of their respective husbands, Naomi and Ruth are also forced to migrate not only geographically, but also to a new stratum of society, to a new place psychologically and spiritually, challenged to cope with the loss of identity and power that was linked to their former social status. Being, for example, the wife of someone in power gives you respectability, honour, and protection that gets lost when that husband dies. Losing wealth or being disgraced or disbarred from one's profession in some way, whether warranted or not, puts a person in a similar category.

These two women were dislodged from their homes, dislocated from their familiar environment, recently widowed, and dispossessed through losing all their wealth. Until becoming known to Boaz, they were

anonymous and living on the periphery of society. Being invisible, they had to bear the humiliation and degradation of having to live from gleanings, an evocative illustration of the position of people who are disenfranchised and not having the power or means to transact as fully-fledged members of a community. Having no money or assets, people know that they have to accept without complaint whatever is offered to them. There is an implicit indignity to feeling that you do not fully belong and in being uncertain of your rightful place. It is an affront and insulting to the natural sense of sovereignty in every human being to be made to feel that you are in some ways dependant and reliant on others and, therefore, beholden to them.

There are many class distinctions that are never named by those in power. They are, nevertheless, often painfully felt by those who are not part of the dominant

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group. The dominant group might explicitly exclude or reject someone. This circumstance is easier for the victim to both practically and emotionally manage because the rules, however unpleasant, are unambiguous and clear. Sometimes the message is so mixed that it is difficult for someone who is being discriminated against to recognise or articulate their sense of disempowerment. For example, in a materialistic society, true worth is measured in financial success. This leads to people lauding, revering, and even loving teachers or rabbis on the one hand, while at the same time begrudging them an income. In the eyes of the wealthy, the lack of material ambition or monetary success renders a person unequal in the eyes of those in wealth compared, for example, to a lay professional who has the same level of expertise and number of years of learning.

What is hardest for people to deal with are the exclusionary practices that are too subtle to confront without running the risk of being labelled a complainer and trouble maker and people who challenge such practices are often labelled in just this way, as being complainers or trouble makers. This affords those in power a justification to disqualify the protests, opinions, or requests made by the person so labelled. Professionals attest to the phenomenon of the wealthy requesting or demanding discounts for services simply because, by virtue of their social status and power, they feel entitled to special consideration. Oftentimes those who are struggling financially feel too ashamed to ask for reductions in fees or too proud to accept a discount. They will often be the ones most demonstrative of their appreciation because they feel that they have to “work harder” or offer more just to be worthy of what others take for granted as being owed to them on the basis of their special privilege.

Naomi and Ruth lived in the betwixt

and between state of neither being welcomed nor integrated into the community, nor being rejected. The uncertainty of not knowing whether one is welcome or if he belongs puts him in the demeaning position of not knowing what his entitlements are in terms of what he can legitimately claim or expect. Such discomfort is often experienced by in-laws or step children and step-parents whose belonging is often conditional on them conforming to certain taken-for-granted family rules or norms and behaving in expected ways.

The simplest practical example would be finding oneself in a new shul and feeling self-conscious and unsure of his status and, therefore, feeling uncomfortable even to just partake of the Kiddush in the same way as members who take their belonging for granted do. This discomfort is immediately eased if a member assumes the role of host and invites this person to be part of the meal.

When these vulnerabilities that result from change are recognised and supported by one’s community, the transition to one’s new life is made more comfortably. People in this sensitive position who are responded to with concern and care are able to eventually re-integrate into the community, confident and secure in their new identity and role. In Ruth’s moving interaction with her mother-in-law, from which the laws of conversion are derived, she expresses her commitment to, in every respect, redefine her identity and belonging. A person’s status or where he fits in the social order, as well as his identity, how one experiences himself, and who he is seen to be by society are supported by his sense of belonging. Ruth secures her belonging by consenting to make the transition to becoming a member of her adopted people by faithfully emulating their ways, customs, and worldview. This migration could not be made unilaterally, nor could the equally dis-

enfranchised and vulnerable Naomi have granted Ruth legitimacy and membership. That had to be facilitated by someone who represented Torah and social authority. Ruth converts to Judaism, and in so doing, becomes the great-grandmother of King David, a link in the chain that will eventually give rise to the Mashiach.

Boaz is the role model of a good host. He noticed the strangers, which showed his fundamental concern for others. He enquired about their history, which showed his interest in getting to know who they were, what they had lost, and what they needed in order for their dignity and value to be restored. Boaz, in fact, went out of his way to work out how Ruth could be rewarded and recognised for her goodness by being enrolled into his people as a fully-fledged Jewess. Boaz used his authority, power, and resources to take Naomi and Ruth in and to restore status and wealth, re-integrating them into the Jewish people.

The Torah warns us, however, that this type of outcome for a person who is displaced, even if it happened through voluntary conversion, is too often not the case. The story could serve to sensitise us to the predicament of anyone in a new place. The actions of Boaz teach how to respond as a host to the new person, whether the person is someone in the categories mentioned in the Torah or someone on a date, in a new job, neighbourhood, or school.

It is a Torah commandment and responsibility of the community to protect the vulnerable through hosting people through every life transition or change of circumstance. The displacement and concomitant imperilment experienced by those mentioned in this article is also experienced by those who migrate to positive life stages like marriage, parenthood, or stages of aging.

People often believe that hospitality to guests means entertaining those who do not need the indulgence or inviting guests who will increase the prestige of the hosts. The ideal of shalom is to knit society into a unified whole. This means reaching out to those that you do not consider part of you and making them your own. ■

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