



CARRYING OUR BURDENS, TOGETHER

Shavuot, the festival of “weeks,” celebrates the summer harvest, when Jews of ancient times would make a pilgrimage to the temple to show gratitude for their crops. It also commemorates when the Israelites received the Torah on Mount Sinai seven weeks after the exodus from Egypt.

Shavuot brings us the story of Ruth and the middah (Jewish value) of **nosay b'ol im chavayro**, sharing the burden with one's friend.

In Jewish tradition, it's not just a mitzvah to help others; it's also a mitzvah to be helped by others. For many of us, receiving help with our mental health is hard. For starters, we put a cone of silence around mental health, and many of us feel ashamed to speak up. We may feel weak, like we don't deserve help, or like we're a burden for not being able to push through or shake off our struggles. We may think others won't believe us or take us seriously. We may fear judgment. Or we may feel alone.

In 2020 we saw the number of Americans with mental health struggles jump up to 40 percent. Yes, nearly half of Americans.

The book of Ruth highlights the special friendship between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. After Ruth's husband dies, Naomi decides to return to the land of Canaan. She encourages her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to return to their own people, as they are not Jewish. Both insist on accompanying her. At the border, Orpah turns back to rejoin her people, but Ruth responds to Naomi's urges to leave by saying:

"Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

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Ruth and Naomi are both widows, traveling to a land impoverished, with no easy means to sustain themselves. And yet Ruth's willingness to support a loved one makes her a hero worthy of her own book and Jewish literature. Likewise, Naomi is remembered as someone who is kind, compassionate and supportive of Ruth.

As Ruth takes care of Naomi, the two form a stronger bond. They connect in a way that is meaningful, and the struggles Ruth helps Naomi bear make them feel closer and more fulfilled.

To be able to take on Ruth's role, to be someone who offers support, is both virtuous and noble. But Jewish tradition says it is just as important to be in Naomi's position, someone who is willing to accept help and to allow someone to help them carry their burden.

With this story, Judaism tells us nobody's burden is either too small or too important to receive help.



HARVESTING COMPASSION IN OUR LIVES

To Talk About

- Are there places in life where you have been unable to ask for help? If so, what made it too difficult?
- How can Ruth and Naomi be role models for us?
- How can you live out the middah of nosay b'ol im chavayro?

Ways to enhance your Shavuot practice with the middot of sharing the burden with a friend:

- Send a gratitude card to a friend who has helped carry your burden.
- Check out some volunteer opportunities in your local community.
- Educate yourself about mental health.
- Call or text a friend to see how they are doing.
- Write a note to your future self to encourage yourself to reach out for help on a day that's tough. The note should include:
 - At least one one affirmation, e.g., I know you feel overwhelmed right now, but you are loved and cared for and things will get better.
 - The name of one person you will reach out to and how you'll reach out.
 - What you will say to them.
 - The types of support and self-care that might be helpful, e.g., talking about it and expressing your emotions, distracting yourself with something fun, engaging in a self-soothing activity, etc.



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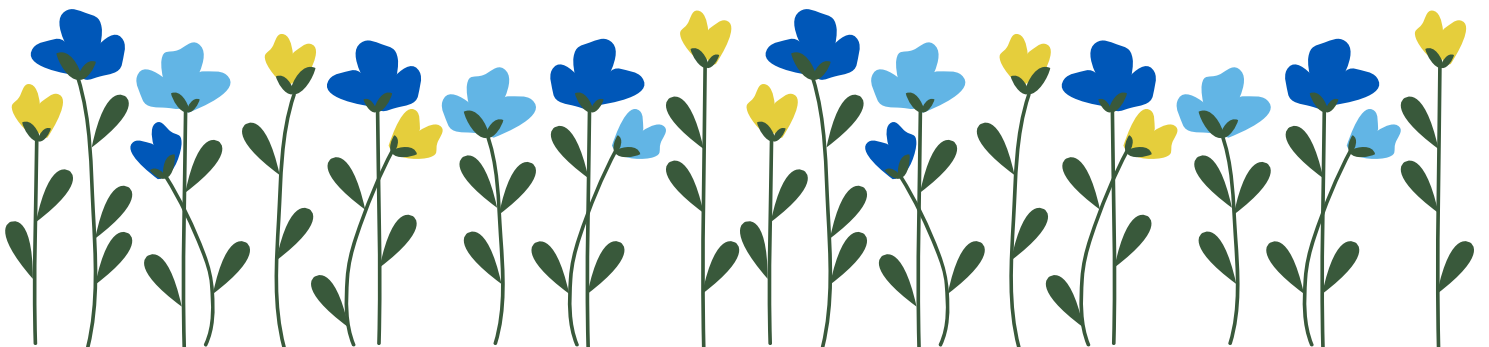
כל ישראל ארבים זה לזה – Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh La Zeh – All Jews are Responsible for One Another

The Talmud (Shavuot 39a) teaches that members of the Jewish community are responsible for each other. In simple terms, we are interconnected and must be invested in the mental wellness and overall well-being of everyone. We must be willing, informed and prepared to help one another, because we all benefit. Ruth was committed to caring for Naomi; recognizing that Naomi was facing hardship, Ruth dedicated herself to her care, honoring the web of interdependence woven between them and, in a similar way, among Jews everywhere.

נושא בעול עם חברו – Nosei B'ol Im Chaveiro – Sharing a Burden with One's Friend

Beyond the idea that all Jews are responsible for one another (kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh), the rabbis teach the value of supporting another person (Pirkei Avot 6:6). The story of Ruth and Naomi's special friendship illustrates this. When faced with struggles, Naomi urges her daughter-in-law to turn back to their own land, their own people and their own gods. But Ruth refuses to leave her.

Together, Ruth and Naomi confront many difficulties but are able to overcome them, because they support each other – exemplifying the middah [nosei b'ol im chaveiro](#).



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Activity

Ruth's story takes place during the season of the barley harvest; thus, the harvest serves as an agricultural occasion for [Shavuot](#). For this activity, consider the two mental health middot that relate to [Shavuot](#) and Ruth's story. Writing on three straws of barley below, consider the ways you show compassion for yourself and others, and how others show compassion for you. Use one straw for self-compassion, one straw for compassion for others, and a third for compassion FROM others. You may wish to cut out the shape of the individual barley straws and write your reflection on the back of each.

- What do I do to show compassion for myself?
- What do I do to show compassion for others?
- What can others do to show compassion for me?

