Why Our Benches Must Bend, and We Must Never Stop Seeing Each Other

Two extraordinary moments of recognition in the Book of Ruth
remind us that the simple act of seeing one another—of identifying with another's pain—
can restore our humanity and redeem the world.

May 16, 2026 – Bamidbar 5786

I have been consumed, these past several months, with the question of how sacred gatherings and beautiful spaces can help us re-center and reaffirm our humanity, in these profoundly dehumanizing times.

I'm talking about the convergence of multiple crises, the intersection of climate devastation amid the global rise of authoritarianism, political extremism & violence, colliding with the white-hot, radically destabilizing acceleration of AI and technological advances, even warnings of the imminent displacement and replacement of human beings by superintelligence.

To put it into terms this community can relate to: this intersection is more treacherous than the meeting point of Fairfax, Olympic, and San Vicente.

Worse, because all of three of these trends are profoundly dehumanizing. We are facing the ultimate triple threat.

The question, as always, is this: What can we do about it?

It was this question that brought me to a gathering of architects and designers in Atlanta, GA, last month, brough together to consider: *How can artful design shape human experiences that will foster sustainable, thoughtful, and human-centric living*?

In Atlanta, I reconnected with Michael Arad, the extraordinary architect who created both the 9/11 memorial and the memorial in Charleston, SC at Mother Emanuel, where a man hoping to start a race war murdered nine Black worshipers in a Bible study class in 2015.

How do you tell a story of love and loss? How can memorialization help build community, create an eco-system of memory? How can a space plant the seeds of reparation and healing?

In Charleston, Arad landed on a large, rounded, fellowship bench, a sacred space designed to invite reflection, connection, healing.

The image is striking… and deeply resonant, because it is precisely the image that the Rabbis describe as the seating arrangement of the Sanhedrin, the High Court in Jerusalem.

The Judges of the Sanhedrin would not sit in one long row, they write, but rather in semi-circles [like the half moon]. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:3). But why?

בדי יהיו רואין זה את זה -- *so that they could see one another*, for if they sat in one long line it would have *pained* them to look at one another, - מצטערים לראות אילו את אילו

ואינן יכולין לשאול זה את זה -- and they would not have been able to ask each other questions. **(**Pesikta Rabati, Piska Ki Tissa)

They needed to be able to see one another. It would *pain them* to render judgment without being able to look into one another's eyes, to encounter the face, the reality of one who saw the world differently.

Given the resonance of this image, you can imagine my delight when, working with our landscape architects this week, before I even shared this torah, we were presented with an image of a long, gorgeous arched bench, shaped like the half moon, placed in the shade of an olive tree, in an enchanted corner of our property.

We need sacred and beautiful spaces to see each other. It hurts us deeply when we fail to.

It's commencement season. Tomorrow we are heading to New York to watch our own beautiful kiddo—6 months old when we started IKAR, raised by the love of this community, a child who grew up in the gaze of a thousand eyes—walk across the stage in a cardboard hat and prepare to step off campus, which itself has not been a walk in the park, into a precarious, even perhaps dystopian reality.

It's not just the big picture that is bleak. It's manifesting in the small print too. Surely you've seen the rush of articles warning of the impact of tectonic political economic, social, and technological shifts on young people, including but not only the loneliness epidemic, the rent trap and lack of affordability in major cities around the country, and the disappearing entry-level job, as many positions that used to be filled by new grads are already almost exclusively being done by the machines.

Luckily, we'll soon be able to draw ample fresh inspiration emerge from one of my favorite genres—the commencement speech—so we'll have some navigational guides to the great unknowns of our time:

Find what you love, and do it with love!

Sweat the small stuff!
Travel, get rich, get famous, skinny dip in a river in Sumatra with the poop of 300 monkeys if you want… but stay kind!
Or, as the commencement speaker at my own college graduation said: *It's your generation's task to clean up the mess we have made.*

My friend, the brilliant journalist Jodi Kantor, just published a book that grew out of her own commencement address last year at Columbia University, written to address the immense anxiety around starting adulthood in a deeply disorienting and uncertain reality. She offers *an escape plan* from the seemingly inevitable dead end of our times. (It's very good—I bought copies for Eva and all her friends.)

But I see in our tradition another escape plan. A very old invitation to create a life of meaning, even still. So I invite us to turn our gaze this morning to the Book of Ruth, which we'll read next week on the holiday of Shavuot.

The story is a desperate plea emerging from the intersection of global and personal loss—a story that hinges on two unlikely and transformative acts of seeing.

Naomi and Elimelekh & their two sons, Mahlon and Chilyon, are driven by famine from their home in Canaan to Moav. Rashi argues that an attempt to protect their wealth drives them from the land, but I read them to be climate refugees. Displaced, dislocated, and deeply vulnerable.

Elimelekh, the husband, dies, leaving Naomi a single mother, a foreigner. Her two sons marry, but then both sons die as well. This is tragedy upon tragedy upon tragedy upon tragedy.

Naomi is drowning in an all-consuming sorrow. She sees herself as bitter (*mara*), and empty (*reika*). She urges the two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to return home. Save themselves from the irredeemable travesty of her life. Her grief is so profound that she seems oblivious to the fact that the very same tragedy has also struck her daughters-in-law, young women grieving the deaths of their own beloveds. All three women are leftovers, in Aviva Zornberg's words. Remnants.

"No," the young women say. "We will return with you to your people." (Ruth 1:10). But Naomi insists, until Orpah obliges, and returns home. And even still, Ruth clings to her.

This is where the first transformative act of seeing occurs. Naomi cannot see Ruth… as I said, her pain is all consuming. But Ruth, even from the depths of her own sorrow, *sees* Naomi. Sees her loneliness. Her vulnerability.

I hear often that people who are hurting do not have the capacity to feel for others who are in their own pain, and we should not expect them to. This is not true. Some of the most empathic and generous hearted people are hurting profoundly themselves. Some of them are in this

room today. I think maybe it's even their broken heartedness that awakens them to the suffering of others.

This seems to be what happens to Ruth. She sees Naomi. Their shared vulnerability awakens her to the realization that their destiny is linked to one another forever:

כִּ֤י אֶל־אֲשֶׁ֙ר תֵּלְכִ֔י אֵלֵ֔ךְ
וּבַאֲשֶׁ֥ר תָּלִ֖ינִי אָלִ֑ין
עַמֵּ֤ךְ עַמִּי֙ וֵאלֹהַ֔יִךְ אֱלֹהָֽי׃

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)

This is a kind of seeing that Aviva Zornberg calls an act of *imaginative empathy*. Ruth can't solve for Naomi's despair, but she can hold her in it. She can accompany her, with tender love. "Ruth… doesn't answer Naomi's theological bitterness," in Zornberg's words. "Instead, she offers an absolute presence that counters Naomi's sense of vacuum."

This is what Christopher Noxon described to me as "with-ness." *You can't take my pain away. But, please, don't leave me to sit in it alone.*

It is this gentle and generous presence that coaxes Naomi back into the land of the living. The two women return to the Canaan.

Ruth goes out to glean in the field of her kinsman, Boaz. Boaz is wealthy, privileged, protected. I hear often that people who are privileged do not have the capacity to feel for others who are in pain. This is also not true.

Boaz does not have to see, but he does.

Ruth is triply marginalized: she is a widow, she is desperately poor, and she is a foreigner. Even worse: a Moabite, from a despised enemy nation. Worse than invisible.

And yet Boaz sees Ruth. Note that the word *lirot,* to see, is again strangely absent from the narrative. What is happening here is something deeper: a kind of *recognition*. *An inner knowing*. He recognizes something deeply human in her. The Rabbis (Shabbat 113b) suggest that what Boaz sees is Ruth's quiet dignity. Rashi suggests he sees her vulnerability.

In a world that treats marginalized women as disposable, Boaz's gaze is a gift. An unexpected blessing. He is determined to protect Ruth. They marry, and their child, Oved, is the father of Jesse, father of King David, the supposed ancestor of the messiah.

In the end, this book is a masterclass in the radical, counter-cultural act of truly seeing another person's humanity, even in the midst of profound uncertainty, even in the depth of their pain and one's own.

These acts of *seeing,* not visual seeing, but rather full identification with the other, become the two turning points of the narrative. Two moments of moral awakening, that manifest in identification with the other as a part of oneself.

In this way, the Book of Ruth models a beautiful, reciprocal awakening of empathy: Ruth asks Boaz: *Why are you so kind as to see me? I am invisible!* And Boaz replies: *Once I learned that you were able to see Naomi, I was able to see you.* (Ruth 2:10-12)

Listen to what the text is telling us: The simple act of seeing one another—of identifying with another's pain—this is what restores our humanity. This is how we build a life of meaning amid the chaos and cruelty of the world.

And there's more: The fact that Ruth and Boaz are the ancestors of King David, and one day the messiah, invites us to contend with the most counter cultural claim, especially in a time of brute force, impunity, and absolute of power:

Redemption comes, our tradition says, when one lonely, broken-hearted human being is able to look at another, and truly *see* them.

I don't know what the commencement speakers have in store for us this week. I hope they don't shy away from the precariousness of this moment. I hope they're honest about the anxiety, unrest, and uncertainty, about the deep anguish we're all holding.

I don't know what they'll say. But I hope they ignite our moral imagination.

I hope they remind Eva, and her friends—those beautiful young adults who came of age through epidemic and insurrection, who navigated college through atrocities and war and devastation, through reckless and feckless and failed leadership, through an astonishing chapter of human cruelty and callousness, of loneliness and alienation and dislocation, through a reality nothing at all like what we dreamed for them…

I hope in a time of despair, they'll remind us that hope—as Bryan Stevenson says—is our superpower. I hope in this time of disenchantment they'll help re-enchant us with the world.

In a world of devastating certainty, I hope they'll remind us to be humble.

I hope they'll share wisdom, in these profoundly inhumane times, to help us reclaim our humanity by honoring one another's.

I hope in a nation consumed by righteous rage and extreme division, they'll awaken in us *imaginative empathy.*

I hope they'll all on us to be brave. And bold. And beautiful. I hope they'll help us see hidden blessings everywhere.

I hope in a time of alienation and dislocation, they'll remind us that bearing with-ness may be the most generous expression of love.

I hope they'll remind us that beauty and art and joy are not luxury items, but spiritual necessities.

And I hope they'll inspire us to bend our benches. To place ourselves in spaces that cause us to lift our gaze and turn toward one another. To recognize one another. To never stop seeing each other-- deeply and lovingly and tenderly.

We need that now. We really do.